



# Two Languages One Country

## Turkey's Elective Kurdish Curriculum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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## Executive Summary

### Key Points

- Full education in Kurdish not allowed by the Turkish constitution. For first time, Kurdish elective language program for grades 5–7 for two hours per week offered.
- Kurdish identity strengthened.
- Elements of "nation-building;" pan-Kurdish worldview assumed but no hate against Turks. Included are Kurdish-historic places in Turkey, Iran and Iraq (but not Syria). Also featured, Kurdish diaspora in Europe.
- Newroz, the Kurdish national holiday, carries revolutionary message of people's uprising against tyranny.
- Children's names exclusively Kurdish. Turks not represented. But all students study about Turkey in remainder of Turkish curriculum.
- Program generally meets international standards. Avoids Turkish-Kurdish dilemma.
- No peace education. Newroz metaphor for Kurdish uprising hard to ignore.
- Kurdish education remains minimalistic. Does not meet cultural needs.
- Kurdish curriculum should be enhanced and enlarged. Ought to include peace education—as should general Turkish curriculum.
- Examined textbooks a good beginning.

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict dates back at least to the early twentieth century. From the vantage point of various elites in the Turkish Republic, the Kurdish question is perceived as posing a serious security threat, mainly to the nation's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, many would argue that there are serious **economic and social challenges to be addressed**: critical among them is **cultural discrimination**.<sup>1</sup>

The current **IMPACT-se** research examines a number of **pioneering Kurdish textbooks** issued by the Turkish Ministry of Education as a first step on the path to meeting the Kurdish minority cultural needs. In June 2012, the Turkish government announced for the first time, that a Kurdish elective language course entitled: "Living Languages and Dialects" [*Yaşayan Diller ve Lehçeler*],<sup>2</sup> would be offered as an elective language for grades 5–7 for two hours per week.

<sup>1</sup> Serra Hakyemez, "Turkey's Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation," *Middle East Brief* 111, no. 3 (June 2017), p. 7.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB111.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "MEB, İlkokul ve Ortaokul Derslerini Belirledi" [Ministry of Education Has Decided on the Courses for the Primary and Secondary Schools], *Sabah*, June 27, 2012.

<http://www.sabah.com.tr/egitim/2012/06/27/meb-ilkokul-ve-ortaokul-derslerini-belirledi>.

These textbooks were **authored as part of a wider Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement**. The peace process began secretly in Oslo in 2009, turned public in 2011, and finally collapsed in 2015. **Peace was supported by majorities in the two communities** (In 2014, support among Turks was 57 percent, with 83 percent among Kurds).<sup>3</sup>

Full education in Kurdish is not allowed by the Turkish constitution, which stipulates: "No language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institution of education." And yet, Turkish authorities looked the other way between 2013 and 2016, as five fully Kurdish elementary private schools were opened. This did not last long and by October 2016 all these schools were closed down.

The Kurdish elective language courses survived the crisis. Arguably, the Turkish government is pursuing a paradoxical three-pronged educational policy toward the Kurdish question: denial of the Kurdish issue in the general curriculum across the nation; some elective Kurdish schooling in Kurdish populated areas; more Imam Hatip religious schools (featuring no Atatürkism; no elective Kurdish; more Sharia).

Kurdish courses were offered in twenty-eight Turkish cities, mostly in the Kurmanji dialect.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, expectations ran high. Some observers believed that 160 thousand students wanted to take these courses, described as a "leap forward" and a "beginning of the solution to the problem of the mother tongue."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, reliable statistics are not available.

The scope of **the elective Kurdish studies project was limited and exploratory from the beginning**. It appears to have gradually become more limited, yet it continues, keeping its symbolic value and the hope for things to come.

### Main Findings

The current research examines the elective Kurdish textbooks for grades 5–7, in Turkish elementary and middle schools. The plan was to have Kurdish textbooks for grades 5–8 in the two main dialects: Kurmanji and Zazaki. We conducted detailed research after textbooks for grades 5–6 were published in both dialects, in 2014. Our research was also able to include another textbook published in 2015 for seventh grade. Unfortunately, the eighth grade textbook was never published.

<sup>3</sup> Serra Hakyemez, "Turkey's Failed Peace Process," p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Including the cities of Diyarbakır, Mardin, Batman, Şırnak, Hakkari, Van, Ağrı and Urfa (now officially Şanlıurfa). "İşte Seçmeli Kürtçe'nin Türkiye Haritası [Here is the Map of the Elective Kurdish Course in Turkey]," *Hürriyet*. Feb. 6, 2013,

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/22534618.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> "Kürtçe Dersi için Kadrolu Öğretmen Yok, ama 160 Bin Öğrenci Var [160,000 Students Want to Learn Kurdish but There are no Permanent Teachers for Kurdish Courses]," *T24*, Sept. 9, 2013.

<http://t24.com.tr/haber/kurtce-dersi-icin-kadrolu-ogretmen-yok-ama-160-bin-ogrenci-var,239032>.

Broadly, the textbooks aim to help students augment their communicative skills in the Kurmanji or Zazaki dialect through basic speaking, reading, listening and writing exercises. They include Kurdish-Turkish glossaries at the end and as with all textbooks in the Turkish curriculum (at the time of publication), the first few pages feature Turkish patriotic language pages: Turkey's national anthem; a speech to the youth by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic; and Atatürk's full-page picture.

Kurdish Culture and identity constitute an important part of the textbooks. They include images, works and short bios of important scholars, poets, artists and activists associated with the Kurdish cause. Examples include internationally acclaimed filmmaker Yılmaz Güney and iconic singer Şivan Perwer. Other examples are seventeenth century scholar and poet Ahmad Khani and members of the famous twentieth century Bedir Xan family.

The books include much material that strengthens Kurdish identity. Arguably, elements of "nation building"<sup>6</sup> and pan-Kurdish identification (*Kurdayetî*)<sup>7</sup> are also featured. Pointedly, the tourist section handles nationalist-historic places in Kurdish-populated areas in Turkey, Iran and Iraq (but not Syria). Two meaningful aspects of Kurdish identity also featured are the connection to Yezidism and the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe.

Kurdish folklore such as dance and, significantly, Newroz, the Kurdish national holiday are covered as well. The central myth of the holiday offers a revolutionary message: that of the people's uprising against tyranny, led by the legendary Kawa the Blacksmith.

When Kawa the Blacksmith saw that they were taking his last son from him, he lost his temper, and without restraint called out like a lion, saying to the people:

'Don't fear! Death is better than captivity.'

[The people] all attacked together. In doing so, they ended the tyrant's brutality. From then on, a new day had begun. This day was March 21 and was named Newroz. Since that day, Newroz has represented two festivals: the festival for the beginning of spring and festival of emancipation.

***Kurdish, Grade 7***, p. 59.

Children's names in the books are exclusively Kurdish; no Turks or other ethnicities are represented. Images depict typical Kurdish features. Leisure-time activities, here and in all textbooks, feature typical Kurdish children's games. The textbooks are also devoid of negative images of "Others," including those nationalities and ethnicities in the region with which Kurdish

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<sup>6</sup> Ertan Erol, "Kurdish Mother Tongue Education Policy of PKK Terrorist Organization," *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi/The Journal of International Social Research* 10, no. 53 (2017): pp. 193–204.

<sup>7</sup> William Gourlay, "Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma," *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 1 (2018): pp. 25–42.

groups have been engaged in bloody struggles. One small exception is an image of a boy examining a film poster with the Turkish title: *Two Languages One Suitcase (İki Dil Bir Bavul)*.

## IMPACT-se Standards

Our IMPACT-se UNESCO derived methodology is designed to analyze national curricula with the perspective of depicting "Others"—mainly rival nations. The current study combines the analysis of the important paradigm of the Other within the context of the beginnings of an minority curriculum.

Our first criterion is that of RESPECT. Given that these elective Kurdish courses belong to the Turkish curriculum, the examined textbooks are bursting with respect for the Kurdish "Other." Turks, as a culture, are not featured at all, except for the obligatory nationalist preface to the textbooks.

There is NO HATE in the Kurdish textbooks. A Kurdish INDIVIDUAL OTHER is represented. Though traditional roles are featured, GENDER is not a major issue as depicted in the textbooks. Elements of this elective curriculum encourage SOUND PROSPERITY and COOPERATION. LGBTQ issues are not dealt with in the texts.

Regarding PEACEMAKING and UNBIASED INFORMATION, the textbooks under examination focus on Kurdish language and culture and avoid directly addressing the Turkish-Kurdish dilemma. And since such a dilemma is not presented, PEACEMAKING, too, is absent. These textbooks do not impart "capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and the promotion of peace." Rather, in the mythological story of Kawa the Blacksmith, the metaphor for Kurdish uprising is hard to ignore. There is no Turk presented as an INDIVIDUAL OTHER, no vision of COOPERATION or RESPECT, though one must acknowledge that students enrolled in the Kurdish electives are simultaneously studying all about Turkey in the remainder of the Turkish curriculum.

## Takeaway Points

The enormous demand for the program as it began, in geography and participation, is telling. Nevertheless, the **scope of this curriculum** has remained minimalistic and its effects are not likely to meet Kurdish cultural needs. In that sense; it is too little, too late. Yet, a conversation about this curriculum is worthwhile because **the question of Kurdish education in Turkey remains unanswered.**

The Kurdish textbooks appear at first glance to be simple and straightforward, no more than very little elective training in a minority population's mother tongue. They are not. Based on the presentations in the texts, **it is more reasonable to think of Kurdish identity being strengthened by these electives, rather than minimized.**

These experimental textbooks **open the door to a pan-Kurdish worldview**, although in a mild and friendly way. There is nothing against Turkey or the Turks. Moreover, this elective curriculum forms only a tiny part of the large nationalistic or Imam Hatip Turkish curricula to which all students are exposed on a daily basis. As such, it is extremely humble in scope and effectiveness. Introduced at a comparatively older age than students normally begin studying their native language, it is limited, elective and modest and cannot be expected to introduce dramatic change. Indeed, these textbooks cannot reasonably be considered a solution to the issue of minority education since their application is decidedly cautious and limited.

There are some that have the view that the Turkish government uses the program as a political maneuver to assuage Kurdish demands for education in their mother tongue and to deflect attention from the state's exclusion of Kurdish from the education system.. But what if the conflict between these two ethno-national groups cannot be easily dismissed? A cautious attitude by Turkish authorities is certainly not surprising. Yet, one must also take note that a policy of openness has persisted at least since 2012.

Our findings suggest that the Kurdish curriculum should be enhanced and enlarged. It ought to include a degree of education for peace and genuine recognition of the Other, aimed at organic vibrant coexistence. The general Turkish curriculum should follow the same path as well.

Educational openness within the context of severe ethno-national conflict between a majority and minority is never a simple undertaking. Prudence, courage and open-hearted dialogue are essential. The examined textbooks promise a good beginning.



## Methodology

IMPACT-se's research utilizes a content analysis research method to examine the textbooks according to the following criteria, which is a condensed version of UNESCO's standards for peace and tolerance in school education:<sup>8</sup>

1. **RESPECT:** The curriculum should promote tolerance, understanding and respect toward the "Other," his or her culture, achievements, values and way of life.<sup>9</sup>
2. **INDIVIDUAL OTHER:** The curriculum should foster personal attachment toward the "Other" as an individual, his or her desire to be familiar, loved and appreciated.<sup>10</sup>
3. **NO HATE:** The curriculum should be free of wording, imagery and ideologies likely to create prejudices, misconceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings, mistrust, racial hatred, religious bigotry and national hatred, as well as any other form of hatred or contempt for other groups or peoples.<sup>11</sup>
4. **PEACEMAKING:** The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.<sup>12</sup>
5. **UNBIASED INFORMATION:** Educational materials (textbooks, workbooks, teachers' guides, maps, illustrations, aids) should be up-to-date, accurate, complete, balanced and unprejudiced, and use equal standards to promote mutual knowledge and understanding between different peoples.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The methodology was initiated by Yohanan Manor. This is an updated version of the standards prepared by Eldad J. Pardo, Jean-Claude Nidam and Shimon Shetreet (May 2014). <http://www.impact-se.org/methodology/>

<sup>9</sup> As defined in the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance Proclaimed and signed by Member States of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Articles 1, 4.2. See also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples (1965), Principles I, III. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

<sup>10</sup> The goal of education for peace is the development of universally recognized values in an individual, regardless of different socio-cultural contexts. See *Ibid.*, Article 6. See also, on exchanges between youth, the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principles IV, V.

<sup>11</sup> Based on *Ibid.*, Articles III.6, IV.7 and VII.39; and on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 18.2.

<sup>12</sup> Based on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 9; and on the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 5.

<sup>13</sup> Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Article V.14.



6. **GENDER:** The curriculum should foster equality and mutual respect between women and men. It should refrain from stereotyped gender roles.<sup>14</sup>

7. **SOUND PROSPERITY and COOPERATION:** The curriculum should educate for sound and sustainable economic conduct and preservation of the environment for future generations. It should encourage regional and local cooperation to that effect.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The preamble to the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, notes the Convention on the Elimination of Any Form of Discrimination against Women and emphasizes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to gender.

<sup>15</sup> Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Articles III.6, and IV.7. On the imperative for developing “systematic and rational tolerance teaching methods that will address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance,” see the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 4.2. On education for international cooperation, see also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principle II.

## Researched Kurdish Textbooks

The following textbooks were monitored for the research in this study. Please feel free to contact IMPACT-se for access to textbooks contained in our research (<http://www.impact-se.org/about-us/contact-us/>). The titles both here and referenced in the text have been translated into English to aid the reader.

Kadri Yıldırım, et al., *Kurdish* (Kurmanji), Grade 5, MEB, 2014.

Kadri Yıldırım, et al., *Kurdish* (Zazaki), Grade 5, MEB, 2014.

Kadri Yıldırım. et al., *Kurdish* (Kurmanji), Grade 6, MEB, 2014.

Kadri Yıldırım, et al., *Kurdish* (Kurmanji), Grade 7, MEB, 2015.

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