Sevres and the National Identities of the Kurdish People and The Republic of Türkiye

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The post-World War One peace treaties shaped the modern Middle East. They controlled how the Ottoman Empire was divided, and what political system it was ruled under. One particular treaty, the Treaty of Sevres, is indicative of the European dreams for the region, and its failure shaped how the region functions and thinks of itself today. The Turkish people and the Kurdish people were particularly affected by this treaty and its failure. This essay will examine how the Treaty of Sevres affected the national narrative and identities of Türkiye, and how the failure of it prevented the development of a national narrative for the Kurdish People. Firstly, it will give an overview of what the treaty was, and what its intentions were. Secondly, it will examine how the Treaty led to "Sevres Syndrome" and a form of siege paranoia that affects Turkish Politics. Thirdly, it will examine how the Kurdish people were turned into perpetual minorities, with an inability to coalesce to gain independence. It will conclude by arguing that the Treaty of Sevres, while never enacted, deeply affected how Türkiye and the Kurdish people thought of themselves, and their political futures.

Section 1 - Overview of the Treaty of Sevres

The Treaty of Sevres remains important to the national narratives or lack thereof, of both Türkiye and the Kurdish people. Although it was signed in August of 1920, it was never ratified. European victors of World War One created the post-war treaties regarding the breakup and organisation of the former Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sevres prioritised Allied interests, followed by Greek and Armenian interests.[1] It placed little emphasis on the national interests of the people of the former Ottoman Empire. Despite the frequent use of the language of national self-determination, there were very few plebiscites to determine the self-interest of various

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[1] Hamza Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, No. 3 (2020): 476.

nations.[2] Instead, this treaty included 433 articles, most of which are considered punitive or

harsh, as well as intended to benefit the negotiators' countries.[3] These include Article 7, which

stated that allies could occupy any part of the Ottoman Empire if their interests were threatened.[4]

Article 24 gave the Allied nations the right to intervene in the Armenian provinces, which was

seen as a form of partition in waiting.[5] There was also a clause stating that Constantinople could

be removed from Turkish control if they failed to uphold the treaty.[6] Articles 63-122 are

concerned with the partition of Turkish territory, and the partition lines were drawn to support

allied interests.[7] Article 231 was a war guilt clause, but the allies waived their claims for

reparations.[8] The treaty also established financial commissions which would have control over

Türkiye's finances and resources.[9] Finally, it reduced the position of the Sultan and Caliph of all

Muslims to ensure that his power and influence would not extend beyond the newly partitioned

borders. The agreement required that each allied power that was assigned a sphere of influence

would recognize and ensure the safety of minorities within it.[10]

The basis of many post-World War One Treaties was Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, or the

ideas of national self-determination. While these ideas were popular, they were never intended to

be implemented in non-European nations, including the ones within the former Ottoman

Empire.[11] The 14 points did however directly address the status of Türkiye. Point 12 states that

Türkiye should be given security and independence, while the other parts of the empire should be

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[2] Loqman Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," *Nationalism Papers* 49, Iss. 5 (2020): 12.
[3] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[4] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[5] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[6] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[7] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[8] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[9] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.
[10] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," 5.
[11] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," 2.

severed and partitioned.[12] These ideas also played a role in recognizing the existence of a

Kurdish nationality, but while this was recognized, they were not granted a state as the theories

of national self determination were not fully implemented.

The Treaty of Sevres was widely unpopular within Türkiye, and thus was never ratified.

It would have severely affected Turkish territory, sovereignty, and law, and the clauses within it

were created to humiliate and punish Türkiye for its actions during the war. Modern Türkiye

exists because of the resistance to the Treaty of Sevres, led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. This

treaty led to revolts, and in 1923 it was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne. Thus, the Treaty

of Sevres plays a large role in the national narrative of Türkiye, however it failed to discuss the

Kurdish people. As it was never enacted this meant that the minority protections it promised that

would have helped the Kurdish people were never enacted, and it was instead replaced by a

treaty that did not discuss Kurdish minority rights.

Section 2 - Türkiye and the Treaty of Sevres

The first group that will be discussed in relation to the Treaty of Sevres is Türkiye and its

citizens. The Treaty was highly controversial within the country. World War One had deeply

traumatised the Ottoman society, and many of their territories had come under occupation.[13] The

end of the war was a period of instability and uncertainty. Some people believed that having a

European Mandate could help to fund rebuilding Türkiye after the destruction of the war.[14]

Comparatively, Turkish Nationalists were fearful of losing sovereignty and did not want Türkiye

to be controlled by European powers.[15] They began a resistance, led by Ataturk, in order to

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[12] Yiğit Akın, "The Ottoman Empire: The Mandate That Never Was," *American Historical Review* 124 No. 5 (2019): 1695.
[13] Akın, "The Ottoman Empire: The Mandate That Never Was," 1695.
[14] Akın, "The Ottoman Empire: The Mandate That Never Was," 1694
[15] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 474.

prevent the Treaty from being ratified, and to establish a Turkish state. The Treaty was signed by

the Turkish Sultan, and was to be sent to the Ottoman Parliament. However, due to the Turkish

War of Independence and national unrest, the parliament had been dissolved and new elections

were not possible.[16] This was a success for Ataturk and the Turkish Nationalists, and led to the

establishment of the Republic of Türkiye.[17]

     Despite never being enacted, the Treaty of Sevres is deeply ingrained in Türkiye's

consciousness and national narrative. It is often called the "Sevres Syndrome" and acts as a form

of siege paranoia that greatly affects historical, and contemporary Turkish politics and

identities.[18] The Treaty of Sevres is regarded as a moment where the intentions of Western

countries were made clear, but it is believed that these intentions to break up the country still

exist.[19] Currently, 72% of Turks believe some countries would like to divide Türkiye, and

contemporary politicians use this belief as a platform, or a way to stir fears.[20] It is believed that

Western powers are continuously conspiring to revive Sevres.[21] This idea continued to be

perpetuated by statements made by Stalin, Armenian and Syrian irredentism, the invasion of

Iraq, and Turkish ostracization from the European Union.[22] There is also a belief that Türkiye is

surrounded by aggressive and irredentist states.[23] This created the fear of both foreign powers,

and minorities within Türkiye.

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[16] Karĉić, "Sevres at 100: The Peace Treaty that Partitioned the Ottoman Empire," 472.

[17] Robinson, "Independence and Revival C. 1919 to the Present," 306.

[18] Michelangelo Guida, "The Sevres Syndrome and "Komplo" Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press," *Turkish Studies*, 9 No. 1 (2008): 44.

[19] Türkay Salim Nefes, "Understanding Anti-Semitic Rhetoric in Turkey Through The Sevres Syndrome," *Turkish Studies*, 16 No. 4 (2015): 575.

[20] Guida, "The Sevres Syndrome and "Komplo" Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press," 37.

[21] Bugra Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 24 No. 1 (2022): 138.

[22] Guida, "The Sevres Syndrome and "Komplo" Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press," 38.

[23] Dietrich Jung and Wolfango Piccoli, "The Turkish—Israeli Alignment: Paranoia or Pragmatism?," *Security Dialogue* 31, no. 1 (2000): 91.

The perception is that Western powers are continuing to strive for a partition in Türkiye, and are doing this through supporting and mobilising minority groups within the country. There is political anxiety about the dismemberment of the country plotted by Western countries and their minority puppets.[24] As a result, there is a strong focus on the homogeneity of Türkiye with a basis of Turkishness.[25] As a result, all ethnic claims that were not Turkish were treated as hostile plots by puppets of Western powers in order to break up the country.[26] The Turkish Republic also became sensitive to the preservation of its unitary state structure, and the avoidance of foreign intervention in its internal affairs.[27] There is a perception of threats from within, including Islamists who want to demolish the secular state, hardline secularists who want to prevent islamists from gaining power, and the fear that minorities, including Christian, Kurdish, Jewish and Armenian, are colluding with foreign governments powers to divide the country.[28]

Part of this fear of the country being divided by outsiders necessitated determining who was an insider, and who was not. This also involved creating a definition of what was Turkish. The new country of Türkiye had three aspects; Turkification, Islamification and Modernization.[29] While the Turkish state was not willing to return to the millet system of the Ottomans, they were willing to include non-Turkish groups.[30] This was providing that they assimilated into the new Turkish culture, and Sunni Islam.[31] Poltically, they pressured non-muslim groups to renounce

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[24] Nefes, "Understanding Anti-Semitic Rhetoric in Turkey Through The Sevres Syndrome," 574.
[25] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 143.
[26] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 143.
[27] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 144.
[28] Guida, "The Sevres Syndrome and "Komplo" Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press," 38.
[29] Türkay Salim Nefes, "The Sociological Foundations of Turkish Nationalism," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 1 (2018): 1.
[30] Türkay Salim Nefes, "Political Roots of Religious Exclusion in Turkey," *Parliamentary Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2018): 806.
[31] Nefes, "The Sociological Foundations of Turkish Nationalism," 2.

rights of autonomy, and in response, they would grant them legal equality.[32] While they received legal equality, they did not receive de facto equality unless they assimilated.

In resistance to assimilation efforts, many non-Muslims emigrated from the country after the Turkish republic was established in 1923.[33] In order to encourage assimilation, it was reccommended that inhabitants use the Turkish language in sermons and prayers in order to exclude non-Turkish Muslim minorities such as the Kurdish people.[34] Additionally, in 1974 they created a law that all property that foreigners acquired after 1936 was illegal and had to go to the state.[35] Jews were a particular target, and were often portrayed as the agents of threats to Türkiye by politicians, in order to serve their political goals.[36] All of these methods were used to encourage minorities to assimilate into Turkish culture, but also because they were fearful of minorities. Sevres led to a traumatic perception of minorities so political leaders were able to justify excluding minorities through the fear of the dismemberment of the country, or the Sevres Syndrome.[37] As they perceived minorities to be a threat, their actions against them seemed legitimate to the Turkish public.

All of these aspects result in a Turkish national identity that is fearful, shaped by insecurities, and has a defensive characteristic.[38] As Western powers attempted to partition the country with the Treaty of Sevres, there is a fear that these countries continue to have this goal. The Sevres Syndrome traces its roots to the creation and failure of the Treaty of Sevres. This treaty continues to affect the national identity and narrative of the Turkish people today. They

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[32] Nefes, "Political Roots of Religious Exclusion in Turkey," 807.
[33] Türkay Salim Nefes, "Negative Perceptions of Jews in Turkish Politics: An Analysis of Parliamentary Debates, 1983-2016," *South European Society & Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 399.
[34] Nefes, "The Sociological Foundations of Turkish Nationalism," 11.
[35] Nefes, "Political Roots of Religious Exclusion in Turkey," 807.
[36] Türkay Salim Nefes, "Negative Perceptions of Jews in Turkish Politics: An Analysis of Parliamentary Debates, 1983-2016," *South European Society & Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 400.
[37] Nefes, "Political Roots of Religious Exclusion in Turkey," 804.
[38] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 146.

have created a political culture of being fearful of others, as they believe that others have, and

are, colluding against them.

Section 3 - The Kurdish People and the Treaty of Sevres

The second group that will be discussed is the impact of the Treaty of Sevres on the

Kurdish people. In comparison to Türkiye, the Sevres agreement likely would have been a

benefit to the Kurish People. Prior to the Ottoman period, the Kurdish people overlapped on the

frontiers of two empires; the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiite Safavids.[39] During Ottoman rule,

they signed an agreement with the Ottoman Empire to support the independence of the Kurdish

princedoms, and support them against foreign aggression.[40] Under The Treaty of Sevres the

Kurdish people were recognized as an ethno-political entity using the theories of Woodrow

Wilson.[41] This treaty also implemented a system by which they could be given a nation-state.

This was to be done using a two-step method. Firstly, they would establish local autonomy for

the predominantly Kurdish areas east of the Euphrates.[42] Then, a plebiscite could determine if the

people desired independence, and if they did, they would be able to apply to the League of

Nations in order to be granted a nation-state.[43] With the demise of this treaty, their opportunity

for a state was taken away.[44] The Kurdish population was then divided between Türkiye, Iraq,

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[39] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," *Nationalism Papers* 49, Iss. 5 (2020): 2.
[40] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," *Nationalism Papers* 49, Iss. 5 (2020): 3.
[41] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," *Nationalism Papers* 49, Iss. 5 (2020): 1.
[42] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 144.
[43] Sari, "Culture of Insecurity and Production of Foreign Policy Crises: Turkey's Sevres Syndrome and Syrian Support for the PKK during the 1998 October Crisis," 143.
[44] Loqman Radpey, "The Legal Status of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in International Law," *Allameh Tabataba'i University* 39 No. 4. (2020): 397.

Iran and Syria.[45] All of these countries subsequently became hostile to Kurdish political activism.[46] Currently, the Kurdish people are the largest ethnic group without a state.[47] This greatly affects the national identity and narrative of the Kurdish people.

As the Kurdish people were split between different countries, their social and political issues, as well as histories diverged. This made constructing a collective national identity difficult.[48] The Kurdish people have never possessed their own political formation, so their historical and political traditions mingled with their neighbours who ruled over them, meaning that while they developed an ethnic identity, they failed to develop a unique national identity.[49] Today, there continues to be a variety of divisions within the Kurdish community. The first is regarding religion, as only 75% of Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims, while the rest are mostly Shia.[50] Additionally, there are linguistic divisions, as there are many different dialects within the Kurdish community.[51] This meant that they lacked a standardised Kurdish language, which made it more difficult to develop a unified nationalist movement. Only into the 1930s was there an effort to produce knowledge about the Kurdish people in order to support an independence movement.[52] While there was a sense that they formed a minority group, their lateness to developing an independence movement was likely a factor in why they were not granted a state during the post-World War One treaty creations.

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[45] Bajalan, "The First World War, the End of the Ottoman Empire, and Question of Kurdish Statehood: A 'Missed' Opportunity?," 13.
[46] Bajalan, "The First World War, the End of the Ottoman Empire, and Question of Kurdish Statehood: A 'Missed' Opportunity?," 14.
[47] Azad Berwari and Thomas Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement: Political Opportunity Structures and National Identity," *Democratisation,* 15 No. 5 (2008): 896.
[48] Radpey, "Kurdistan on the Sevres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation," *Nationalism Papers* 49, Iss. 5 (2020): 1.
[49] Neophytos G. Loizides, "State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, No. 4 (2010): 513.
[50] Loizides, "State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey," 514.
[51] Loizides, "State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey," 514.
[52] Loizides, "State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey," 515.

There are two distinct struggles for the Kurdish people; a struggle against the governments where they live, and a struggle for coherent nationhood amongst themselves. As they are minorities everywhere, the Kurdish people perpetually struggle for representation, and to protect their rights. European powers established safeguards for minorities, like the Kurdish people, within the new borders, but these failed.[53] In Iraq, the Kurdish people found that equality, autonomy, and group rights were seldom granted, all things that had at various times been promised to them.[54] As a result they turned inwards for protection through the Kurdish community. State repression offered minority activists an essential tool in creating a sense of nationalism, as it hardened their sense of solidarity.[55] This support for each other has created a strong sense of pan-Kurdish solidarity, but did not create a unified Kurdish movement.[56] They have a lot of diversity in experience, political circumstance and aspirations, so their collective goals are rather broad.[57] In almost all literature on the Kurdish people, they are referred to by the country they are living in, for example, Iraqi Kurds, or Turkish Kurds. This demonstrates that they are still not recognized as a cohesive political unit, but are instead regarded as a community with strong ethnic links. Additionally, inter-Kurdish organisation has been hindered by linguistic differences, religious differences, and by intra-Kurdish rivalries.[58] The goals of the Kurdish leaders are also very different as some leaders want an independent Kurdish state, while others

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[53] Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, "Empires after 1919: Old, New, Transformed," *International Affairs* 95 No. 1 (2019): 90.
[54] Azad Berwari and Thomas Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement: Political Opportunity Structures and National Identity," *Democratisation,* 15 No. 5 (2008): 895.
[55] Loizides, "State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey," 516.
[56] Shahram Akbarzadeh, et. al., "The Iranian Kurds' Transnational Links: Impacts on Mobilisation and Political Ambitions," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, No. 12 (2020): 2290.
[57] Akbarzadeh, et. al., "The Iranian Kurds' Transnational Links: Impacts on Mobilisation and Political Ambitions," 2285.
[58] Akbarzadeh, et. al., "The Iranian Kurds' Transnational Links: Impacts on Mobilisation and Political Ambitions," 2285.

want greater recognition or control over the states they currently live in, as well as a diversity in how they should achieve these goals.[59]

Overall, the separation of the Kurdish people into different countries, and the lack of protection for their minority rights greatly affected the Kurdish national identity. They were split into different countries, meaning their issues and lived experiences varied between the countries they live in. The failure of the Treaty of Sevres means that this community experienced a delay in achieving a nation-state, and created additional barriers for them to do so. They were not organised enough to be granted a state in the post-World War One treaties, and their separation into a variety of different new states meant that their histories and issues affecting them diverged. However, since the 1990s there has been an increasing effort for the Kurdish people to work together, and protect each other. This may mean that they eventually acquire a state. Nevertheless, this would be occurring 100 years after they originally could have achieved this had Sevres been enacted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Treaty of Sevres was a very impactful document in the history and national identity development of both Türkiye and the Kurdish people. For Türkiye, it signalled the true goals of Western powers and sparked a decades-long fear of minorities and foreign powers, also known as the Sevres Syndrome. For the Kurdish people, the failure of this document to get ratified meant that they never got a state, and it made getting a state harder in the future as there were more opportunities for fragmentation, and more groups to fight against for independence. This treaty deeply affected how both the Turkish people and the Kurdish

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[59] Akbarzadeh, et. al., "The Iranian Kurds' Transnational Links: Impacts on Mobilisation and Political Ambitions," 2285.

people viewed their identity and shaped how they participated in politics from World War One to

the present.

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