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Author(s): RAVZA ALTUNTAŞ ÇAKIR

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Reclaiming the *Ummah* from the Margins: The Case of Türkiye's HÜDA-PAR

RAVZA ALTUNTAŞ ÇAKIR

Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Türkiye

ORCID No: 0000-0002-1691-5649

ABSTRACT *This paper investigates the relationship between an ethnic Muslim minority identity and transnational Muslim solidarity through the case study of HÜDA-PAR,¹ the most organized political Islamic organization and the second-largest political party native to Southeast Türkiye. In this paper, it is scrutinized how the concept of ummah motivates the domestic/ideological, national, and transnational political discourse and initiatives of HÜDA-PAR. Based on interviews with senior members of the party, it is clear that HÜDA-PAR views “Islam as nationalism” while also adopting the ummah as a mechanism to voice the aspirations for greater Kurdish rights and interests. As a part of examining the party’s ideological position, the first section explores how ummah became an empowering notion within a national Turkish political structure. Section two illustrates the way the notion was used as a legitimizing force within the religiously conservative Kurdish social structure. The third section examines the notion’s unifying role with like-minded Pan-Islamic groups within the region they operate. The article also addresses the ambiguities that a mostly abstract and idealist ummahist approach to modern politics brings when faced with Kurdish nationalism, the regional realpolitik, and democratic pluralism.*

Keywords: *Ummah*, HÜDA-PAR, Kurdish Political Islam, Minority Politics in Türkiye

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Introduction²

The notion of *ummah* has long been a source of identity for Muslims, with a strong symbolic, normative, and political appeal. In a generic sense, the *ummah* “denotes a cluster of believers bounded by their faith and religious and moral responsibilities, in a single borderless community.”³ Regardless of this broad understanding, reflecting a global sense of belonging to Islamic brotherhood and sisterhood, the *ummah* has been constructed and reconstructed theologically, ideologically, politically, socially, and strategically in different times and contexts. While it is a lexically and semantically contested concept, a quality which manifests in the plurality of understanding, for many Muslims, *ummah* remains a powerful source of overarching identity in the public consciousness, even after decades of nation-state experience.⁴ Moreover, the concept of *ummah* reflects the political conditions of the modern Muslim world, which “affects, and is affected by Muslim politics.”⁵

Today, “the *ummah* has come to constitute a primary referent in contemporary Muslim debates about identity.”⁶ Muslim politicians, movements, as well as scholars have made the concept of *ummah* central to identity claims for pursuing and propagating, religious authenticity, popular legitimacy, and political agendas.⁷ One of the most discordant accounts of the role *ummah* plays in shaping identity concerns its relation to the issue of nation and nationalism. There are four major intellectual camps on this topic. The first category constitutes some Islamist ideologues and essentialist orientalists. The former like Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Ali Bulaç (1951), advocates that “Muslim’s nationality is his faith” and thus propagate “Islam as nationalism.”⁸ The latter, like Ernest Gellner, joins them in advocating the incompatibility of an *ummah*-oriented identity with one subject to the territorial nation-state.


The second category of nationalist Muslim thinkers like Abd-Rahman el-Kawakibi (1855-1902), Sa’d Zaghloul (1857-1927), and Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), on the other hand, resorted to the ethnic perception of *ummah*, while accepting Islam as a crucial aspect of identity, cultural heritage, and social solidarity. They saw no innate conflict between Islamic identity and ethno-nationalism.⁹ The third category is mainstream Islamist movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood and *Millî Görüş*, which, while proclaiming the existence of a global *ummah* unity, are nevertheless nationalist in orientation. Although they do not produce an antithesis to the nation-state paradigm, they aim to Islamize the state, with the goal of creating an Islamic nation-state. The final category, radical Islamists like ISIS, advocate for a non-territorial, borderless Islamic political unit, or a Caliphate, on combative and expansionist methods.¹⁰ All these trends have articulated different forms of identity politics, institutional

schemes, and political agendas with their utilization of the *ummah* within the context of the nation.

In these trends, an *ummah*-oriented identity is juxtaposed to a homogeneous nation-state. However, this juxtaposition is complicated by involving additional factors, such as the existence of an ethnic minority identity within a nation-state. The relationship between ethnicity, nationhood, and religion is always complex, yet when it comes to minority Muslim groups in Türkiye, this complexity is often understudied. At a time when drastic changes are occurring to the spectrum of ideas on religion and politics in Türkiye, Kurdish actors that engage with Islamic identity politics are often consigned to the margins. While a great deal of academic work has focused on contemporary Kurdish actors who engage with ethnic and secular identity politics, Kurdish political Islam remains an understudied realm.

In this paper, I am interested in how HÜDA-PAR, espousing “a platform of Islamic values and greater rights for Turkey’s ... mainly Sunni Kurds”¹¹ approaches the notion of *ummah* in their political discourses. HÜDA-PAR views “Islam as nationalism” while they locate their advocacy for Kurdish rights within a framework of Islamic justice. Unlike other mainstream Islamist movements, HÜDA-PAR is not necessarily nationalist in orientation. They employ the notion of *ummah* to challenge what they deem to be divisive secular nationalisms, both Kurdish and Turkish, in favor of a common cause with their perceived co-religionists on the regional stage. A Pan-Islamist, rather than nationalist, advocacy for transnational *ummah* unity is present. The *ummah* provides the grounds for HÜDA-PAR to critique the nation-state through Islamic argumentation as well as a mechanism to voice the aspirations for greater Kurdish rights and demands.

This paper analyzes primary sources, such as semi-structured interviews and the party program, alongside scholarly literature. Furthermore, the paper uses the existing scholarship on HÜDA-PAR to explain the historical background of the party. However, due to the mostly journalistic nature of the resources that do exist on HÜDA-PAR, which at times lack the rigour of academic endeavor, primary research to explore how HÜDA-PAR defines its political and ideational outlook was necessary. At times, this primary data supplements source material and at others contradicts the existing literature. Accordingly, this paper’s examination of how HÜDA-PAR treats the concept of *ummah* within its approach to modern socio-political questions fills a lacuna in primary research-based academic analysis of HÜDA-PAR, through interviews with the leading executives of the party headquarters in İstanbul and Diyar-



The concept of *ummah* reflects the political conditions of the modern Muslim world, which “affects, and is affected by Muslim politics”

bakır. It also contributes to the existing literature on Kurdish political Islam and minority politics in Türkiye.

Through my analysis of these primary sources, there are identified three broad areas where the concept of *ummah* affects, and is affected by, HÜDA-PAR's political positions:

- (i) HÜDA-PAR's identity and foundational tenets, as they both include an overtone of Islamic identity.
- (ii) HÜDA-PAR's support for the resolution of the Kurdish issue through employing an *ummah*-loyalty over ethnic-loyalty approach.
- (iii) HÜDA-PAR's Pan-Islamic attitude and *ummah*-oriented solidarity in Muslim politics and international relations.

Before moving on to examine these three interlinked points in more depth, I provide a general overview on HÜDA-PAR.

General Overview on HÜDA-PAR

HÜDA-PAR was established as a political party in 2012, as the first officially non-secular, Islamic party in Türkiye, as declared by the party manifesto.¹² With the advent of HÜDA-PAR, as Z. Aslı Elitsoy observes, the conservative Sunni Kurdish population found a political platform reflecting their religious identities and transmitting their social-political demands.¹³ For religiously conservative Kurds, HÜDA-PAR provides an alternative to the socialist People's Democratic Party (HDP) and the conservative Justice and Development Party (AK Party):

Kurds need more than just the PKK to speak for them.... Political pluralism in Kurdish politics is the key to any sustainable peace.... And that might pave the way for groups such as HÜDA-PAR to act as an opposition party in a new stage of more vibrant and competitive politics.¹⁴

In Türkiye, HÜDA-PAR's foundation is typically defined as “the final phase of the evolution of Hizbullah [in Türkiye], from an illegal armed Islamist group to a legal political party” with an unprecedented degree of influence.¹⁵ Ruşen Çakır, a leading journalist on Islamist movements in Türkiye, suggests that the year 2000 differentiates the “first Hizbullah” (under Hüseyin Veliöğlü), which was “the most important radical [and underground] Islamist organization in Türkiye,” from “the second Hizbullah” (after 2000), which engages in legal activities through civil society organizations and the press, and most importantly which does not resort to violence as did its predecessor.¹⁶ HÜDA-PAR, as an offspring of Hizbullah, today becomes involved in the democratic political arena,

promoting a pro-Islamic and pro-Kurdish agenda in politics. Meanwhile, HiT (Hizbullah in Türkiye) continues its public appeal as an organization and chooses to be unofficial, rejecting the legalization of the movement.¹⁷

In the mid-2000s, at a time when Islamic forces were given the public opportunity to mobilize under the democratization processes of the AK Party governments, former Hizbullah members also made the most of this political opening.¹⁸ During this period, Çakır suggests, a segment within the former Hizbullah movement became involved in the public and civil realm and examined “its past in a critical manner,” which was “a sign of a significant and radical change.”¹⁹ According to Elitsoy, following the example of the Muslim Brotherhood, a change in public image manifested itself in total disarming in favor of civil activism, such as fundraising and social welfare projects. This new civic activism was primarily conducted through an association known as *Mustazafalar Derneği*, *Mustazaf-Der*,²⁰ (Association of the Oppressed), improving the group’s distorted and violent image among the Kurdish masses.²¹ The Turkish public did not know about the existence and scope of public support for the movement until 2006, when *Mustazaf-Der* organized mass meetings that gathered as many as 100,000 people in Diyarbakır. Çakır interprets this situation as Hizbullah’s unexpected adaptability “despite its past failures,” renewing itself “to become one of the key actors in Türkiye, especially in the Southeast” within the changing context of the Turkish socio-political atmosphere.²²

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Appeals approved the court’s verdict closing the association for “providing services and actions on behalf of the terrorist organization Hizbullah.”²³ Several months after, HÜDA-PAR was established as a legal party. It is argued that “*Mustazaf-Der* provided the linkage and continuity between Hizbullah and HÜDA-PAR,” as Mehmet Hüseyin Yılmaz, the founding president of HÜDA-PAR, was also the president of the *Mustazaf-Der*.²⁴ Responding to the question on the link between Hizbullah and HÜDA-PAR, the vice president of the party, Sait Şahin,²⁵ said that the individuals and groups that founded HÜDA-PAR all share an Islamic activist past through their engagement with a great spectrum of Islamic civil society organizations, including Hizbullah,²⁶ *Mustazaf-Der*, and various other Islamic components’ which is why’ he insisted, HÜDA-PAR should not be considered as “an organic part of any specific movement.”²⁷

Şahin asserted that people with ‘Islamic sensitivities’ have benefitted from the flexibility and opportunities provided by changes in the socio-political atmo-

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form from radicalism (Hizbullah) to moderation (HÜDA-PAR) when previously excluded Kurdish Islamist political actors are given the opportunity spaces to participate in electoral and political processes.³² The brief reference to Erbakan's *Millî Görüş* also suggests this break from radical Islamism and reconciliation with the participatory Islamism in Türkiye, where the AK Party has its roots.

The *umma* orientation has also maintained its popular appeal and remains a powerful source for an overarching identity in Kurdish consciousness, which HÜDA-PAR aims to represent and utilize in its political position today

This general overview on HÜDA-PAR will be followed by an examination of how HÜDA-PAR's conceptualization of the *umma*, as discussed by its executives, guides the party's general approach to political identity, the Kurdish issue, international relations with other Muslim-majority countries, and the international arena.

Three Broad Areas Where the Concept of *Umma* Impacts HÜDA-PAR's Political Approach

HÜDA-PAR's Self-Identification: Reclaiming Umma for Political Identity

Contradicting the literature that refers to HÜDA-PAR as an 'Islamist' and 'Kurdish' party, Şahin opposes both adjectives to define their identity. With regard to the first descriptor, Şahin defines HÜDA-PAR as "a party with Islamic sensitivities, that takes Islam as its reference point" informing its party agenda. According to Şahin, "Islamism is a category that causes division" among Muslims who "should define themselves within the overarching community of Muslims, not with other adjectives."³³ Serkan Ramanlı, a member of the general executive board of HÜDA-PAR, defines the party as a socio-political movement that aspires to the attainment of an Islamically virtuous society through a civil, political, and intellectual struggle.³⁴ HÜDA-PAR's political stance entails a greater involvement with societal issues that in return requires an engagement with a bottom-up Islamization of society. To this end, the HÜDA-PAR's party program has stated that its aims are "to make the system harmonious with the beliefs and values of the community, not the community with the system, to revive the human and Islamic values that are degenerated consciously and unconsciously."³⁵

By its leading member's own descriptions, HÜDA-PAR is not an Islamist party, but a party with Islamic sensitivities. On a related note, one wonders what the practical difference is between an Islamist party and a party that "takes Islam

HÜDA-PAR exhibits a self-acclaimed *ummah*-oriented identity through which it both challenges and empowers the organization's political claims against Kurdist ideologies and the nationalist Kemalist establishment

'Islamism', as an -ism, characterizing a separate ideology other than Islam as a holistic religion. For Islamists, Islam is political at its core political that "denies the separation of religion and state, and ethics and politics."³⁶ In this regard, even though HÜDA-PAR does not define itself as Islamist, it would be clearly typified under the general category of Islamism according to the conventional usage of the terminology.

Additionally, the people I interviewed did not prioritize HÜDA-PAR's Kurdish identity. On the contrary, they all criticized ethnic identity politics and rather focused on an *ummah*-based approach. For example, Yavuz said, "We are not an Islamic Kurdish party; we are a party that takes Islam as a reference and whose members are predominantly Kurdish."³⁷ Yavuz explained the party's opposition to any ideology that can potentially harm the unity of the *ummah*, be it nationalism or Kurdist. Şahin also expressed that ethnicity is not a constitutive element in their political identification: "Even if all our founders, our members, all the people who vote for us were Kurdish, we would still not call our identity Kurdish or brand ourselves a Kurdish party."³⁸

One has to understand HÜDA-PAR's position through both normative as well as historical perspectives. During the establishment of modern Türkiye, Hakan Yavuz argues, "peasant tribes and religious Kurds were the least ethnic conscious sector of the population, reflecting instead an *ummah* (religious community) view of the state-society relations."³⁹ However, as Yavuz argues that the "Turkish state's inability to generate a shared language of politics and solidarity with democratic institutions to replace Islamic solidarity and institutions –which were wiped out by the Kemalist practices– appears to be the key reason for the politicization and radicalization of Kurdish nationalism."⁴⁰

Nationalism in Türkiye has been characterized by Paul Brass's observation that "ethnicity and nationalism are not 'givens' but are social and political constructions."⁴¹ Over the years, with the help of the adverse effects of Kemalist nationalist polarization, ethnic identity politics has gained mounting support

as its reference point?" Even though HÜDA-PAR executives oppose the descriptor of Islamism, their definition of the *ummah* is clearly bounded by a particular Islamist ideology. I believe their dissociation with Islamism is due to their perception of political Islam as an organic part of the Islamic religion; thus, they refuse to refer to it with any other unravelling adjective. There is a general disinclination in political Islamic discourses with the term

among the Kurdish masses. In light of Michael Hechter's instructive typology, "state-building nationalism" and "peripheral nationalism" are socially constructed in a reciprocal manner in modern Türkiye.⁴² However, the *ummah* orientation has also maintained its popular appeal and remains a powerful source for an overarching identity in Kurdish consciousness, which HÜDA-PAR aims to represent and utilize in its political position today.

However, saying that HÜDA-PAR does not give primary significance to Kurdishness in reference to identity does not mean they disregard their ethnic identity and relationship with the Kurdish populace. It is clear that when HÜDA-PAR explicitly "defend[s] Kurdish rights, it does so within a wider discussion of Islamic social justice values" and prioritizes religious identity over ethnic identity.⁴³ Nevertheless, their platforms cannot be neatly explained via their self-description as an *ummah*-oriented party: It is apparent in HÜDA-PAR's platforms, that if not self-identified as a Kurdish party, it is a party formed primarily of Kurds founded and based in the Kurdish majority areas of Türkiye. This reality renders it natural that HÜDA-PAR should focus on the history and modern condition of southeastern Türkiye. Therefore, there is much to be found in their party platforms that derive from the experience of being Kurdish and living as a minority under a dominantly Turkish cultural and political context. Thus, one can understand their sensitivity to the descriptor Kurdist, due to an affiliation with secular and leftist Kurdist movements; however, it would appear that the general categorization of them being Kurdish will likely continue considering the constitutive elements and social dynamics of the party.

Overall, HÜDA-PAR exhibits a self-acclaimed *ummah*-oriented identity through which it both challenges and empowers the organization's political claims against Kurdist ideologies and the nationalist Kemalist establishment. This ideological stance also influences the way the party approach the Kurdish issue on the basis of how they conceptualize the *ummah*.

HÜDA-PAR on the Kurdish Issue in Türkiye and the Region: Reclaiming Ummah for Regional Solutions

The abolishment of the Caliphate was a distressing event for many Muslim societies, as it destroyed the traditional sources of legitimacy and superstructure on which these societies were based, replacing them with institutions new and unfamiliar. The Ottoman Caliphate, for many, "represented an Islamically-sanctioned union of . . . multi-ethnic polity and authority; it symbolized the unity of Muslims as a faith-based community and allowed space for diverse loyalties and local autonomy for the periphery."⁴⁴

The end of the Empire marked the transition from Ottoman religious communalism to Turkish nationalism, in which Kurds lost their majority status as part of the Muslim *millet* to a minority one. During the waning years of the

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faced a struggle to create a shared national identity. The re-conceptualization of all ethnic populations in Türkiye as *Turkish* people or the policies of Turkification has been especially problematic for a considerable number of the Kurds, who make up one-fifth of the population.⁴⁶ The resultant conflict and ambiguities in identity have constituted a long-term challenge. HÜDA-PAR's reclaiming of the concept of the *umma* addresses this identity issue by objecting to the homogenizing policies and institutions created by Turkish nationalism. For Ramanlı, the notion of *Türkiyelilik* –being an inhabitant of Türkiye/being from Türkiye– that has been created recently is a positive step.⁴⁷ Rather than “the singular nature of Turkishness” and a monolithic nationhood as defined “in the early Republican years”, AK Party governments in the 2000s initiated a process of reconsidering the meaning of Turkishness in a more inclusive and pluralist, especially in a more Muslim-oriented, manner.⁴⁸ Although the state's policy outlook has become more nationalist recently, HÜDA-PAR remains on cordial terms with the AK Party government due to their shared Islamically conservative approach to politics.

In the post-caliphal era, HÜDA-PAR believes that the Kurds have been exposed to Janus-faced oppression and discrimination in Türkiye, based on both religious and ethnic grounds. According to the party program:

The ideology of the republic was founded on two fundamental principles. One of them is secularism, and the other is Turkishness. Because of the praxis related to secularism and the revolutions, the Kurds suffered pains like their Turkish brothers in the West... Apart from them, they have suffered due to the policies of Turkification, as they were not Turks.⁴⁹

HÜDA-PAR also asserts that these discriminations and injustices are a modern construct, which did not exist before the rise of Turkish nationalism in the late 19th century. Şahin suggests that the Kurdish problem today has emerged

Ottoman state and even under the nationalist government of Young Turks, the traditionally educated religious Kurdish leadership and fraternities were “against complete autonomy, for they believed in the unity of the Islamic *umma* and until the end of the Ottoman Empire and even afterwards they saw the sultan as the legitimate caliph.”⁴⁵

After the compartmentalization of the Ottoman Empire, the post-caliphal nation-state in Türkiye, like its peers in the Middle East and North Africa region,

from the centralist and nationalist policies undertaken by the *İttihat ve Terakki* (Committee of Union and Progress) that have failed to tackle the minority demands and destroyed the strong bonds between the Muslim nations of the Ottoman Empire. HÜDA-PAR also holds the modern Turkish Republic responsible for the exacerbation of ethnic nationalism and minority oppression, which in return “spoils this brotherhood” [between Turks and Kurds].⁵⁰

HÜDA-PAR suggests that, like Turkish nationalism, Kurdish nationalism is a modern construct that was not prominent during the Ottoman Empire. Şahin asserts that the Kurds have been “consciously working to serve the *umma* and sacrificing to protect Islamic unity to their best abilities,” especially during and after the WWI era, explaining the transition that the Kurds underwent after the WWI as follows:

When Shaikh Mahmud Berzenci declined to accept the conditions of the Sèvres Treaty and refused a separate Kurdish nation-state [from the Ottoman Empire], the West decided to punish the Kurds. They split them into four parts and placed them under four dictators so they would be continuously oppressed until they developed a strong nationalist sentiment and grew weak in their strong commitment to the *umma* identity.⁵¹

Reiterating their pan-Islamist ideology, Yavuz asserts that the “Kurdish problem should be resolved within the confines of Islamic unity”⁵² while Şahin indicates that their approach to the issue is “from an Islamic and humanitarian perspective on the basis of justice, not via an ethnic or nationalistic stance.”⁵³

Their locating of the Kurdish issue within the discourse of *umma* distinguishes HÜDA-PAR from secessionist Kurdist groups, as does HÜDA-PAR’s emphasis on the essentiality of the expansion of broader Muslim social and political solidarity. Within Şahin’s words, “[a]s an *umma*, our greatest problem is division.... We do not support the separation of any Muslim-majority country along ethnic or sectarian lines.... The state should give rights to the Kurds so that the road leading to division is barred.”⁵⁴ Şahin also warned that the conflict, if it heads towards a possible separation, would only weaken Muslim unity, serving “the interests of Islam’s adversaries.”⁵⁵ Pan-Islamic thinking, as famously formulated by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, supportive of eschewing divisive nationalisms and Western hegemony in favour of “universal ties”⁵⁶ finds great similarity in HÜDA-PAR’s ideological outlook.

In this aspect, the *umma*-oriented rhetoric of HÜDA-PAR functions as an empowering and subversive concept challenging the centralist and assimilationist state ideology, while affirming party members’ spiritual solidarity with their “Turkish brothers.” Ümit Cizre observes that Kurdish Islamists have traditionally perceived a “national solution” dividing “the Muslim communities

in the region” as against the principles of the *umma*.⁵⁷ As such, HÜDA-PAR’s advocacy for achieving “a solution to the Kurdish issue on an equitable basis”⁵⁸ also complements Christopher Houston’s analysis that “Islamist discourse on the Kurdish problem gives its assent to the existence and equality of Kurds as a *kavim* (people)” as “Kurdish Islamist discourse is concerned to show that on the contrary Islam does not cancel ethnic subjectivity . . . At a more basic level, Allah delights in diversity.”⁵⁹

While at the same time emphasizing the importance of unity among Türkiye’s Muslim population, HÜDA-PAR asks for more substantial political and institutional reforms for the public recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity. HÜDA-PAR provides several recommendations in the party program for the institutionalization of cultural rights and freedoms to the Kurds in their entirety in Türkiye. First, HÜDA-PAR maintains that “Kurdish shall be accepted as the second official language, and it shall also be a language of education. If sufficient demand requires it, the provision of education to students in their native languages shall be facilitated.”⁶⁰ The party also argues for the reinstatement of the original Kurdish names of places that have been given Turkish names. And last but not the least, HÜDA-PAR expects the state to issue a formal apology to the Kurds, followed by a constitutional recognition of “the existence of Kurds . . . approved by the constitutive founders of the country.”⁶¹

Although HÜDA-PAR advocates certain tangible recommendations, it proposes that it is the public who should decide on the nature of the resolution. Hüseyin Yılmaz told *The Economist* magazine that: “We are Muslims before all else, but we will take note of the people’s wishes,” adding that “the people will no doubt cleave to Allah’s path.”⁶² This marks a general characteristic of Islamists, which is their conviction that the foundations of society and the popular will in predominantly Muslim societies will naturally support Islamic values. Nevertheless, given that the will of the people had been cast as the foremost factor in deciding the Kurdish political future, Yavuz also proposed that “if the nation-state paradigm continues, and Türkiye pursues its nationalist ideology against the Kurdish minority, then the right to decide their future should be given to the Kurds. If there is no justice, then Kurds should look for other options.”⁶³

Şahin believes that the Provincial Ottoman state system, which granted autonomous governance for the then Province of Kurdistan, had been effective. Yet, rather than developing this system and modernizing as the times and demands of the people evolved, the nationalist Turkish governments, he emphasizes, resorted to more centralist and less recognitionist policies, as the Empire waned. Şahin noted that “today, Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria should not replicate the mistakes that the Ottomans made [in their final years]. They should find genuine solutions” to deal with the Kurdish issue to arrive at a permanent solution.

On this topic, both Şahin and Yavuz discussed political models granting political authority to local districts, which they insist, would better accommodate the culture, goods, and demands of “the local people of their regions.”⁶⁴ Yavuz suggested that “a federation or autonomy is not division. Rather, it will create a more peaceful mode of living.” To press for their claims that a federal system would not lead to a Kurdish secession, but a stronger and unified Türkiye, he noted that “for instance, today, Germany is a federation, but who can say that Germany is divided?”⁶⁵

HÜDA-PAR reclaims the *umma* for the resolution of the Kurdish problem, which involves denouncing the monolithic nation-state for a more pluralist, recognitionist, and power-devolving system

In essence, HÜDA-PAR's rhetoric focuses on the history of injustice afforded to the Kurdish people on religious and ethnic grounds. Though HÜDA-PAR asks for broader collective rights and freedoms for the Kurds in their focus on Kurdish as a language of education and in their desire for more open borders, they demand justice with Islamic overtones, not nationalist tendencies. Their criticism towards the nationalist and secularist policies of the state is also mostly based on religious discourse, rather than an ethnic one. As such, HÜDA-PAR reclaims the *umma* for the resolution of the Kurdish problem, which involves denouncing the monolithic nation-state for a more pluralist, recognitionist, and power-devolving system. As they see it, this political restructuration will not only stop the infringements on the rights of Kurdish people at the hands of the unitary and homogenizing nation-states, but also unite Muslims in general, and Muslim Kurds in specific, through an overarching identity. With that stance, HÜDA-PAR represents a different outlook on Kurdish politics in the form of *ummahist* Kurdish political Islam. Yet, this rhetorical alternative and ideal faces challenges when confronted with residual normative, social, and political realities and it is in return impacted by these realities.

Modern Kurdish communalism operates on interlinked levels of ethnic and religious identity attachments, none of which could be disregarded in Kurdish politics. For instance, in an increasingly conservative political atmosphere in Türkiye, “the Kurdish ethno-nationalist movement, which is rooted in secularism and Marxism, has adopted a more welcoming attitude toward Islam” for wider Kurdish support.⁶⁶ In the last decade or so, an increasing number of religiously conservative Kurds were attracted to the HDP as it directly challenges HÜDA-PAR's claim of being the representative of religious Kurds.⁶⁷

In addition, unlike the previous affinity of ethno-nationalism with secularization, today there is a growing global trend of “Islamism” that has

In the context of competing loyalties to win a broad cross-section of Kurdish votes, HÜDA-PAR cannot ignore the residing patriotic appeal in Türkiye's religiously conservative Kurds

identity. Corresponding to these observations, “several conservative Kurdish groups have developed an ethno-nationalist discourse and attitude in recent decades”⁷⁰ to provide practical alternatives to secularist Kurdist groups, abandoning Pan-Islamic rhetoric in favor of a “Kurdified Islam.”⁷¹

In essence, normatively speaking, HÜDA-PAR defines itself via the *ummah*, which is to say that it is a party defined by its membership of believing Muslims and their spiritual bonds with other Muslims globally, not just its platforms. HÜDA-PAR's abstract and idealist *ummahist* discourse will continue to be affected by politics generating possible re-conceptualizations of the *ummah*. In the context of competing loyalties to win a broad cross-section of Kurdish votes, HÜDA-PAR cannot ignore the residing patriotic appeal in Türkiye's religiously conservative Kurds. As such, HÜDA-PAR is likely to internalize a form of ethnic belonging that is congruent with the aspirations for a supranational unity of the *ummah*, which already seems to be developing in Kurdish political Islam. With those analyses addressing HÜDA-PAR's future prospects, the paper will now turn to exploring how the party functions in the international arena.

HÜDA-PAR's Attitude towards Other Muslim-Majority Countries: Reclaiming Ummah in the Transnational Context

With the structural fragmentation after the abolishment of the Sunni Caliphate, new forms of interconnectedness that embody “Muslim communalism today” are replacing the old forms and bringing new theological and practical quandaries.⁷² The interviewees discussed their proposals for achieving Islamic unity on an international level in modern times. They declined to support the reinstatement of the Islamic Caliphate, while maintaining it as the ideal form of Islamic unity. However today, Şahin insisted, as the ideal is not conceivable “in the short-term at least,” immediately realizable projects within existing conditions need to be pursued rather than being trapped in a fantastical realm. In this context, Yavuz stated that “ISIS has claimed its Caliphate, but it has no meaning. All Muslim scholars are against such a Caliphate and its declaration as such. Islamization should be bottom-up, not top-down.”⁷³



Şahin has approached the issue of social mobilization of Islamic solidarity in a gradualist way, saying that “first, we need to start working on creating institutions to construct dialogue and meaningful, effective communication at the peoples’ level, group level, and state level, respectively, to resolve our internal controversies.”⁷⁴ Şahin summarized their vision for realizing the unity of the *ummah* as “making Islam practicable in society and creating platforms for enabling Muslim cooperation.” As a platform for greater *ummah* collaborations, Şahin noted their project of an “Islamic Parties’ Union,” which is like Socialist International, of which all Islamic parties throughout the world can be members. For Islamic cooperation to be realised, Yavuz insisted, “ethnic and *madhhab*-based disagreements should be resolved.” He affirmed his support of “the stance of Ghannushi, who recently demonstrated his aim to resolve the Sunni-Shia tension.”⁷⁵

For the interviewees, resolving internal controversies refers to transcending *madhhabi* (sectarian) tensions and Sunni and Shia differences within Islamism. HÜDA-PAR has maintained good ties with both Sunni and Shia Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Jama’at Islami, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁷⁶ However, the Alawite-Sunni and Islamist-ethno-nationalist⁷⁷ cleavages did not receive particular attention during our interviews, most likely due to HÜDA-PAR’s exclusionary vision of *ummah* that encompasses sharia-minded Islamic groups and individuals. This exclusionary vision of *ummah* is also a by-product of their strict and textualist Islamist philosophy that has little or no tolerance for unorthodoxy and moral pluralism. Although HÜDA-PAR demonstrated a degree of political moderation, evolving from a former radical

Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu,
Chairman
of HÜDA-
PAR Party,
addressing the
Party Congress
in Batman,
Southeast
Türkiye, on
March 18, 2018.
SELMAN TÜR / AA

Islamist movement to a legal party, it is clear that pluralist modes of identity and genuine democratic outlook in their relations with non-Islamic or anti-Islamic groups are yet to be developed. Evolving from an ideology that has rejected democratic politics, to form a political party that nominates itself as a participatory actor in national politics, HÜDA-PAR and its representatives are mostly silent on the issues of pluralism, coexistence, and democratic thinking.

As, Güneş Murat Tezcür argues, “moderation that integrates Islamists [to mainstream politics] is not necessarily conducive to democratization.”⁷⁸ Within the context of democratization, it is important to theoretically differentiate moderation (which mainly involves procedural and behavioural attitudes to change and does involve but not necessarily oblige ideological or structural transformation) from democratization (which requires normative endorsement; social determination, and institutional change).⁷⁹ For HÜDA-PAR to develop a democratic identity requires that norms and values to take root in attitudes as well as normative ideas.

Going back to their international policy, HÜDA-PAR idealizes the institutionalization of transnational Islam as the natural position of Muslim politics through which political, economic, and social solidarity of the *ummah* would be realized. For instance, Şahin proposes a modern political structure based on his alternative account of an “imam” [leader]:

Ummah is the name of the Islamic *millah* [nation], which is expected to be united around an *imam* [leader]. Yet, today, there is no one person who is both a religious and political leader of the Muslim *ummah*. However, the Qur’an says that non-personal entities can be an *imam* as well... It means there can be intangible leadership for the *ummah* around which Muslims can unite. This can take the shape of an agreement, a pact, or a union.⁸⁰

He recalls the idea of Said Nursi’s *cemahiri Islamiyye* (the unity of Muslim republics) as an example of this pact-based form of unity.

HÜDA-PAR’s leaders criticize national territorial divides, which they believe do not fit into the histories, cultures, and societies of the Muslim world. As a part of the criticism of the nation-state paradigm in the region, HÜDA-PAR calls for an amendment to the artificially drawn borders in the post-Ottoman Middle East, which also caused the legal-political separation of the once unified Kurdish region, splitting the Kurds between four separate nation-states alienated from one another.⁸¹ As such, HÜDA-PAR aims to challenge the hegemony of the secular Kurdist parties’ in presenting Kurdish claims and demands. The party program also situates the political future of the Kurds in a transnational context stating “All kinds of [artificial] borders and separation between Muslim Kurds shall be removed, regardless of the political and governmental structure.

Every required measure shall be taken to put human relations on the right track.”⁸²

Rather than a separate Kurdish state, the HÜDA-PAR executives argue that a formal restructuring like EU-like transnational political project, which would transcend the territorial borders between Muslim countries, undoing Sykes-Picot, is necessary.⁸³ On the topic of structuring a formal Islamic unity, the HÜDA-PAR Party Program suggests that “[a] new powerful structure shall be created under the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation... This political structure shall face all regional problems and solve them, so cruel dictatorships, the tension between Shia and Sunni, ethnic issues, and problems based on national interests will be solved with the robust and fair intervention of the Union.”⁸⁴

On the other hand, the criticism of the Westphalian system is not particular to defenders of Islamic transnational institutions; among proponents of political visions of multiculturalism to cosmopolitanism, many strands of thought today challenge the nation-state paradigm. David Chandler; for instance, asserts that “[t]here is a growing consensus that expressing political community in territorially bounded terms is inherently problematic because of its narrow, self-interested and divisive framework.”⁸⁵ Barak Mendelsohn also argues that religion, on its divine nature, “circumvents the territorial divide by seeking to unite people around a set of rules applied on a non-territorial basis.”⁸⁶ In this context, Faiz Sheikh contends, “the scope for developing a framework for common identity is huge” for Muslim transnational organizations and networks, similar to the EU, on the basis of Islamic bonds and identity.⁸⁷

However, the post-national *ummahist* aspirations of HÜDA-PAR do not overlap with the view of the majority of Turkish Islamists. In the context of the Kurdish issue, while nationalists oppose any special status against the unitary structure of the Turkish state, as Akif Emre observes, the conservative segments, often branded as Turkish Islamists, show increasingly statist and nationalistic tendencies towards the Kurdish people.⁸⁸ Islamist intellectuals and public figures largely disapprove of multiculturalist projects in favor of the claims that “diverse ethnic identities can coexist peacefully within an Islamic framework” even under a unitary nation-state.⁸⁹ Houston suggests that “the subordination of Kurdishness to a ‘higher identity’” of Muslim unity has often been articulated.⁹⁰ On this matter, Kurdish Islamists criticize Turkish Islamists as endorsing to a “nation-state Islamism” in which Turkishness and Islamic identity are seamlessly united.⁹¹ However, Kurdishness is deemed a factionist component “within the paradigm of the syndrome of the national survival that champions unity and solidarity” demanding integration as opposed to “the recogni-

HÜDA-PAR’s leaders criticize national territorial divides, which they believe do not fit into the histories, cultures, and societies of the Muslim world

HÜDA-PAR is likely to incline towards a similar stance to *Millî Görüş*, which has been able to balance nationalism with loyalty to the Muslim *ummah* in its development of a nationalist version of Islamism

tion of ethnoreligious pluralism.”⁹² Unlike the HÜDA-PAR, other segments within Kurdish political Islam have been more vocal in their critique of nationalist tendencies within Turkish Islamism, such as the concept of “Turkified Islam,” albeit in the form of “Kurdified Islam.”⁹³

Overall, within a unitary nation-state structure, HÜDA-PAR utilizes the ideal of transnational structuration of the *ummah*, which endows it with political legitimacy among the conservative Kurdish masses and a transnational connection with like-minded groups and parties. Yet one needs to be cautious between the interlinked levels of aspirations of authenticity, reality and inevitability of hybridity and instrumentality. For instance, if *ummah*-based restructuring is not committed by other components of the *ummah* and if other nation-states will persist with nationalist policies, then HÜDA-PAR indicates that Kurds should think of their own future. For HÜDA-PAR, separation is not desired but rather seen as a last resort if such a restructuring does not happen. However, they abstain from providing details on this last resort, whether consciously, to eliminate conflict with the Turkish public and authorities, or because it is an unthought arena for them. Regardless we should recognize that national and transnational politics affect the ways in which HÜDA-PAR will continue to develop its view of and position in relation to *ummah*, deriving from interactions with actors inside and outside of Türkiye. At present, HÜDA-PAR’s *ummah* is quite dichotomous, encompassing the global community of Muslims as they exist today, as well as an abstraction, a vision of what the future of the global community should be once a greater unity is achieved. However, as their pan-Islamic ideal continues to be obscured by the nationalist state, macro-Turkish, and regional politics, HÜDA-PAR is likely to incline towards a similar stance to *Millî Görüş*, which has been able to balance nationalism with loyalty to the Muslim *ummah* in its development of a nationalist version of Islamism.

Conclusion

Today, HÜDA-PAR widens the spectrum of ideas, ideologies, and policies represented in the Kurdish political environment. It represents a unique blending of a minority ethnic identity (in Türkiye), transnational Kurdish identity (in the region), and pan-Islamic identity (globally). As such, it provides an important case study in which the political discourse on the *ummah* was reconstructed in the post-caliphal era within different ethnic and sectarian segments of the Turkish society.

Based on interviews with the party's political elites and supplementary primary and secondary sources, this paper has offered a preliminary analysis of the ideas that emerged regarding the party's utilization of the *umma* in relation to their self-identification, their stance on the Kurdish issue, and their transnational policy outlook. These three arenas demonstrate the discourse on *umma* as an essential social and political policy motivation, which not only gives HÜDA-PAR a pan-Islamist identity but also grounds their criticism and debates against the nation-state model of Türkiye and Muslim-majority countries. Thus, the *ummahist* rhetoric is not only used for transnational Muslim solidarity but also utilized for advocating for the greater Kurdish rights and interests in surrounding states.

Today, HÜDA-PAR's reclaiming of *umma* to articulate and legitimize modern political solutions presents a possible alternative view to both the HDP and the AK Party lines. However, like many other organizations, HÜDA-PAR's identity is shaped by several attachments and serves different functions for different members, functions that may at times be in conflict or a state of ambiguity. I have analyzed how an abstract and utopian *ummahist* approach may particularly bring ambiguities to the party's political stances. As a fairly new political party, HÜDA-PAR will continue refining and developing its party identity and its position. HÜDA-PAR's conceptualization of the *umma* is likely to continue to reflect and be impacted by the political conditions, ideological transformations, and *realpolitik* shaping Türkiye and the Middle East and North Africa region in the coming years.

So far, HÜDA-PAR has not become a viable alternative to the secular HDP or the conservative AK Party for the religiously conservative Kurds as it faces two broad issues regarding its identity and policies. First, HÜDA-PAR's *ummahist* Islamist worldview competes with evolving worldviews of Kurdishness and "Kurdified Islam." Any claim to the leadership of the Kurds will have to consider the transformations that have happened within the secular Kurdish movement and Kurdish political Islam in the past two decades. Thus, whether and how HÜDA-PAR could "successfully combine the Kurdish ethnic identity and an Islamic ideological discourse" is an important question for their political prospects.⁹⁴ Second, post-Islamist politics signifies a philosophical turn in Islamism for new approaches. Post-Islamism is increasingly situated around a more inclusive discourse, leaving totalitarian ideologies in favour of a more pluralistic, human rights-concordant, and politically secular vision. Although HÜDA-PAR demonstrated a degree of political moderation, evolving from a former radical Islamist movement to a legal party, it is clear that its pluralist modes of identity and genuine democratic outlook in the organization's relations with non-Islamic or secular groups are yet to be developed. Thus, whether and how HÜDA-PAR could address the shifting priorities in the Muslim world in which a major transformation has occurred "from identity to democracy" is another critical topic.⁹⁵

Insofar as identity is hybrid, dynamic, and constantly taking shape, it remains to be seen whether HÜDA-PAR's loyalty to the *ummah* identity, Kurdishness, and democracy can be syncretized and what its real world implications might be. However, HÜDA-PAR, as a minority Islamist party in Southeast Türkiye, currently represents a modern face of Pan-Islamism with an idealistic, yet mostly abstract and ambiguous *ummahist* political ideology, which remains untested when it comes to combining the pragmatist necessities of daily politics, the popular demands of the people in South-Eastern Türkiye, and democratic politics with their comprehensive Islamic worldviews. ■

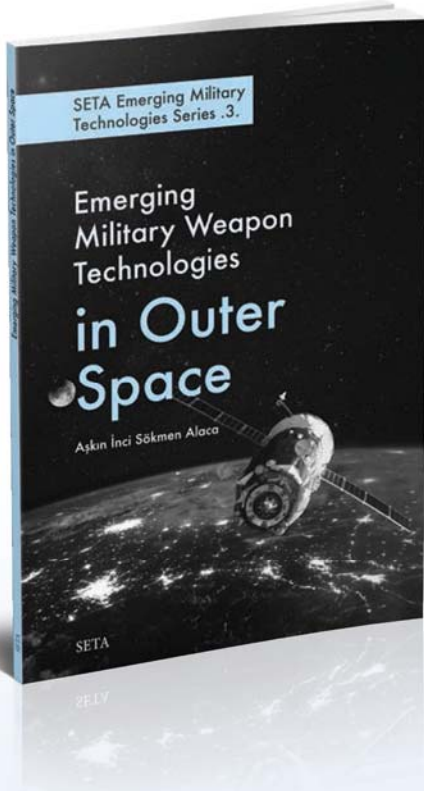
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2. This paper has emerged from a workshop on "Conceptualising the Umma," funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom, held in Kuala Lumpur, in association with Nottingham University/Malaysia, December 10-11, 2014. The author would like to express her gratitude to James Piscatori for organizing the *ummah* workshop series. The author would also like to thank Kelly al-Dakkak, Joud Alkorani, Rahman Dağ, Hakan Erdagöz, Z. Hale Eroğlu, Halime Kökçe, Mohamed Moussa, and the two anonymous referees of the journal for their valuable comments and criticisms.
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30. Mehmet Yavuz passed away on August 10, 2019 at the age of 45. Yavuz was my initial contact person for this research. He first met me in İstanbul and then kindly arranged other interviews in Diyarbakır. I am thankful for his efforts and contributions to this research.
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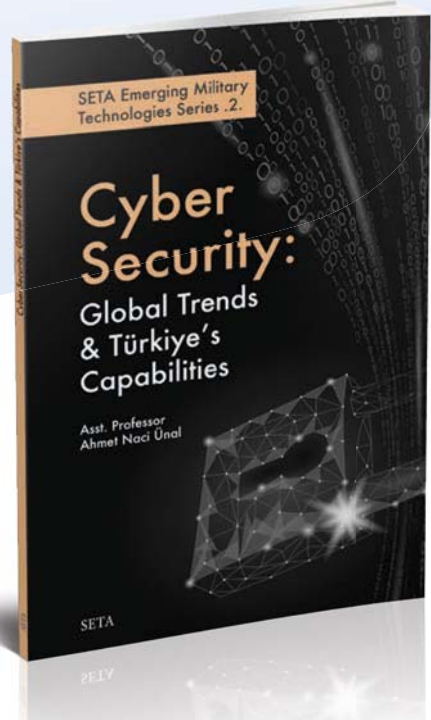


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