The Kurdish question in the context of Turkey and Middle East politics: an interview with Noam Chomsky

Dilan Yildirim

This interview was conducted by Dilan Yildirim on January 22nd, 2013. Dilan Yildirim is a Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Harvard University, also pursuing a secondary degree in Critical Media Practice at the same university. Geographically located in the Kurdish-Qizilbash region of Turkey, her research is concerned with questions of political violence, state formation, insurgent politics, politics of space, landscapes of memory, narrative theory and visual anthropology. Dr. Noam Chomsky is one of the preeminent intellectuals of the United States and a world-renowned linguist. A tireless advocate for peace, he has been writing about and fighting against U.S. imperial polices across the globe for the past four decades. He has been an important critical voice on Kurdish, Palestinian, and other struggles in the Middle East. The Forum editor and Journal editors wish to acknowledge his invaluable contribution to this forum.

Dilan Yildirim: I would like to start with your personal history in engaging the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, especially in Turkey. You are one of the few vocal Western intellectuals speaking of the Kurds and the Middle East. So, I would like to learn about how you got involved in these issues?

Noam Chomsky: Well, I have been involved in Middle East affairs all my life. I knew something about the Kurds just from reading general Middle East history. But I really became much more involved closely in the 1990s, as state terror escalated, and, particularly, the US contribution to it. Throughout the 1990s, I tried to bring some public attention to the fact that the US was directly involved in some of the worst atrocities that were taking place. Some of what I wrote was translated into
Turkish by a Kurdish publisher. The head of the publishing company was put on trial. I was asked to come to take part in the trial and be a witness. I did and I also got a request from the head of Human Rights Watch to be there for the trial. So I went.

When I was there… Fatih Tas and, his lawyer, Osman Baydemir, suggested that I insist on being a co-defendant since it was my work. His assumption, which turned out to be correct, was that they would call off the trial. The trial was, of course, a total fraud, like military trials. So I made some kind of a petition to be a co-defendant. When we went into the courtroom, this was obviously pre-arranged; the prosecutor said something to the judge, which I didn’t understand. Between the two, they talked back and forth and canceled the trial. And there was a lot of press there, so I think they just didn’t want the publicity.

By that time, I knew some of the activists, people like Sanar Yurdatapan and, Ragip Duran, who I had known from here, in fact—he was a visitor here. I also was in touch with this very good Human Rights Watch researcher there, Jonathan Sugden, and I spent a lot of time with him. Right after the trial we went up to present this series of collections of banned books to the prosecutor as an act of civil disobedience… After that, I stayed in Istanbul and then went to Diyarbakir. At that time, it was still, kind of the tail-end of the terror. And the terror was intense. For example, I remember that there was this television crew following us, probably Turkish security as everyone assumed. They saw the people with me and Jonathan, Ragip, and others… and saw Kurdish children, playing, whose clothes match the Kurdish flag. They just directed us somewhere else because it would be too dangerous for the parents after we left. I visited people living in caves.

I talked to a lot of people and also gave a talk. After the talk, something very dramatic happened. I have this book over there, you see the Kurdish-English dictionary there…. Well, after the talk, with a big crowd, television crew and so on, these three young men came up and gave me the book. This is a banned book which was published in Paris and which is something they smuggled in. It was a pretty brave thing to do…. So I spent some time in Diyarbakir and Istanbul, came back a couple of years later, and did approximately the same thing. I also visited some of the slums in Istanbul where refugees live. They live in abandoned buildings and areas marked for destruction. There is nothing there you know. Some of them lived in a room—a family…. a husband and a wife, and a couple of kids. The husband could not go outside, it was too dangerous, he could get killed…. The two teenage kids—a boy and a girl- did go out and work. They brought back some money. And the family survived. We spent some time talking to them and there were a couple of others like them. I asked whether there was any chance of their going back to their villages, which had been wiped out. They said that they could go back only if they signed a statement saying that the village had been destroyed by the PKK. Of course, they had been destroyed by the army. And, of course, they did not sign the statement. There was almost nobody in Istanbul seeing they were there, and there must be huge numbers of them because there are hundreds of thousands of refugees just scattered around.
The next time I went to Diyarbakir, there were actually things that were improved. It was not as repressive as it had been the first time. There was a little more freedom in the use of language. I talked with the students in the universities and they are pretty open. One rather poignant moment was when I asked if they can take me to the Armenian sector? As you know, this is one of the areas that was destroyed at the end of the great massacre. So, with some reluctance, they took me there. And there was not much left. There was an old church, which was a total wreck. I’ll come back to that because it is interesting. I asked if anyone has saved any of the relics and there was a little store across the street where an old man showed us what he had picked up of whatever had been destroyed in the church. And, of course, Kurds were responsible for a lot of the massacres. And, now they, the Kurds themselves are being devastated. It is a complex situation.

This time, when I went back for the Hrant Dink Memorial Lectures, I met a lot of people who worked on Armenian issues. But they told me that the church had been reconstructed as part of the revival of the commitment to bringing out what actually happened in the Armenian massacres of 1915, so the church had been apparently reconstructed. Hrant Dink Foundation does things like that. Again, in the last couple years, unfortunately, things have been going backwards again. It looked in the early years of the millennium as if there was real improvement. I don’t think things are any way near as bad as in the 1990s but now Turkey has more journalists in jail than any other country in the world and hundreds of political figures in prison.

On the other hand, there is some opening. Whether it means anything or not, especially the negotiations with Ocalan. Most of the activists I talked to in Istanbul this time were not sure. Actually one of the interesting people I talked to, someone I had not met before, was Ismail Besikci. He is out of prison temporarily but he is going back, he is a real heroic figure. I guess its ok to say that. He was not very optimistic about the negotiations and he thought that—as some others did, that the negotiations are about to bring in not only the BDP, which I heard from others, but also the Kandil. The basic thought coming out was that Ocalan by now probably had lost contact, did not know much of what was happening, and they should be brought in directly. It is an interesting suggestion but I don’t know if Turkey would be willing to do it.

There’s a situation emerging in which Turkey is going to have to face a lot of issues. For one, there is a degree of autonomy in Northern Iraq. It is impossible to imagine what is going to happen in Syria. If anything survives in Syria, there will presumably be a Kurdish area there. This means adjacent to Southeastern Turkey there will be two regions of relative autonomy, maybe something more, which is bound to have an influence on whatever happens in Turkey and the Kurdish areas. I think also with some other minorities such as Alawites. It won’t be disassociated with whatever goes on in Syria.

D: I would like to ask you to further expand on that. How do you consider the changing status of the Kurds in a changing Middle East? Could you maybe especially compare it with what happened in the 1990s?

NC: Some of the worst massacres were taking place at that time. And, one of the horrible aspects of it, it just could not get reported here. The press like the New
York Times had quite a good reporter in Ankara, Steven Kinzer, he just didn’t report it. He had to learn about it from other sources like Human Rights Watch—they did quite a good job on reporting what was going on. There were other sources, there were dissident Turkish sources. The scale was just shocking. I think the US was providing eighty percent of the arms. And, in 1 year, 1997, when the atrocities were really peaking, Clinton, in that single year, provided more arms than the entire Cold War combined...and you just couldn’t get a word in the American press about it.

These are the things that I try to deal with. 25 years of effort, just to try to get somebody to pay attention to the genocide in East Timor that the US was backing, Palestine issue goes back forever. Case after case like this. I have to write now this morning the Guatemalans. The courts announced that they were going to try General Rios Montt. And in the early eighties he was Reagan’s darling, a man dedicated to democracy so on and so forth…. Major efforts to try to bring some attention to the fact that we were supporting genocide and massacres in Guatemalan highlands. Actually again America’s Watch, which was the American branch of Human Rights Watch, they did quite a good job. Amnesty International, a lot of activists down there been working.... So, finally, after decades, some of these issues have been brought to trial, but these are really hard things to do. And the Kurdish issue is like that, it just couldn’t break through the silence and nobody was interested.

D: Do you see any changes in the US foreign policy in terms of what is going on in Turkey now? In terms of when we consider the limited opening on Kurdish issues, limited cultural rights or recent negotiation process? Since there are also thousands of activists and pro-Kurdish politicians who are in jail. My question is, given this situation, how does the US relate to this negotiation process?

NC: The US does not care in one way or another about repression. All I have to do is to look at what Clinton did in the 1990s when it was a thousand times worse than it is now. They were just pouring arms in. The government wouldn’t talk about it, the media wouldn’t talk about it. We just do it. Now, the policy toward Turkey changed in quite an interesting way. In 2003, when the US government was trying to invade Iraq, of course they wanted to use Turkey, which is strategically placed for an invasion of Iraq. As you recall, the Turkish government refused. The public polls in Turkey shared about 95 % disapproval. To everyone’s surprise the government went along with the public. The even greater surprise, the military went along with the government because there is a major US military base in Eastern Turkey.

There was fury here against Turkey and the reaction was pretty striking. “How dare that they follow the wishes of the 95 % of the population when we are telling them something else?” Actually Paul Wolfowitz, the Secretary of Defense, who was hailed as a great exponent of democracy, berated the Turkish military for allowing the government to do this. He said, You have the power; you should take it and force them to do it. That’s the attitude toward democracy here, a very striking example but not the only one by any means. And, at that point, Turkish human rights violations began to be reported in the press. Take a look at the New York Times or other journals. During the worst period of repression when we were
directly involved they didn’t report it. But, when Turkey did something evil like following the will of 95 % of the population and not doing what we told them. Then they start reporting human rights violations. Now you can read the press there is virtually nothing. Even though the repression increases, there is almost no concern about Turkey.

There is a lot of concern about Turkey, because it has taken independent stands in other issues. One of the main ones is with regard to Iran. Turkey and Brazil, 2 years ago, actually worked out a deal with Iran, which would have settled the nuclear issue. The deal was that low enriched uranium would be moved from Iran stored in Turkey and the Western powers would fuel to provide medical reactors. And, the Iranians agreed to them. Actually that was Obama’s proposal. He proposed it to president of Brazil, assuming that Iran would have never agreed. But Iran agreed. At that point the US backed off the proposal and bitterly denounced Turkey and Brazil for their irresponsibility. It immediately rammed through a sanctions resolution in the UN, which made it worse. At that point, Turkey was quite openly expanding its relations with Iran. They were increasing trade ties, planning to triple trade relations. Turkey needs oil. Iran needs manufactured goods close to each other. Since then the relations have cooled and the Islamic government in Turkey is becoming more solidified…. But, all of these things are very worrisome to the US who does not want to tolerate independence. Turkey also hung back at the time of the invasion of Libya. Later they went along but at the beginning they refused to participate like most of the world, and the US didn’t like that. These are the sort of issues that concern Washington, not human rights violations.

D: During your last visit in Turkey, when you gave a speech at Hrant Dink foundation, you remarked that Kurdish question is the most important internal issue of Turkey politics How does the US, do you think, conceive of the Kurds’ changing status as political actors within Turkey & the Middle East? And, how does this influence their relation not only with the Kurdish issue, but also with Turkey? Is there any change?

NC: I think the Kurdish issue here is regarded mainly through the lens of the so-called war on terror. So, the PKK is a terrorist group. As you may know, Obama has broken all records in violation of civil liberties, with the Kurds being a prominent example. The Obama administration did one of the worst things in this domain, which didn’t get much publicity. The case of Holder v/s the Humanitarian Law Project, its a very important case. There is a group called Humanitarian Law Project, which gives legal advice. And, they were giving legal advice to the PKK, which in the civilized countries perfectly legitimate thing to do. I meet people on the terrorist list and give them advice, too. PKK is on the terrorist list, which is a totally illegitimate list. It is just an executive decision with no evidence required, no supervision. Just whatever the government says…. To show how arbitrary it is, Nelson Mandela was on the terrorist list until 5 years ago. The Obama administration sued the Humanitarian Law Project and brought a court case against them and went all the way up to the Supreme Court.
And, the Supreme Court supported Obama and sentenced against the Humanitarian Law Project. And, in the course of doing that, they accused of Humanitarian Law Project of giving material assistance to terrorists. Material assistance was legal advice. And, if you read the wording, it includes almost anything. I have met Nasrallah, for example, who is on the terrorist list. I suppose, if I tell him, I think you need to turn to non-violent means, and that’s material assistance to terrorism. That’s the most extreme violation of freedom of speech I have seen in a long time. And, that was Obama's initiative and the PKK was right at the center of it. This illustrates how they look at it. When I look at it, I think the US is not very enthusiastic about the negotiations with Ocalan.

Essentially, what the US wants is powerful states stay in control, and serve US interests. That’s why the US supports the dictatorships. I mean just take look at the US attitude toward so-called Arab Spring. I mean the oil dictatorships are the countries they really care about. They suppressed any manifestation of pressure for democracy, sometimes violently and the US is fine. As long as you keep control, it’s fine. In case of Egypt, the US supported Mubarak till the very end, the very last minute. When the army turned against him, obviously it couldn’t support him anymore. So they put him out to pasture and are now trying to shore up the old regime. France did the same thing in Tunisia. The Western attitude in general is that democracy is a real threat; it is dangerous. You can see that in the case of Turkey in 2003, when the government actually responded to the almost unanimous will of the people, and this infuriated the West.

Take Hamas, another organization on the terrorist list. They wanted an election, a free election. It was recognized actually as the only free election in the Arab world. Immediately, the US and Israel and the EU turned to punishing the population. Harshly. The US immediately set in motion a standard operating procedure when a democratic government’s doing the wrong thing: start a military coup. So, right after the elections the US started organizing a military coup but Hamas preempted it, and blocked it. At that point, it was just total fury. Voting wrong way in the free elections is bad enough, but blocking a US military coup, that’s a real crime. And the punishment for Gazans increased, siege is increased so forth and so on. All of this is very obvious. It takes real genius for American intellectuals, like virtually everyone who writes about this, to talk about our yearning for democracy, or democracy promotion efforts. It doesn’t matter how much counter evidence there is. And how dramatic it is, it just cannot be seen. It is like kind of religious dogmas that make fundamentalist religion look open and free, and that’s Harvard faculty, I am not talking about Fox News. Its almost uniform.

But that’s the attitude toward Kurds. If they can be kept quiet and suppressed, everything is fine. In fact, we'll help suppress them, we’ll help slaughter them, we’ll murder them and destroy thousands of villages just everything happened in the 1990s under Clinton. Notice not George Bush. And, liberals keep quiet. On the other hand, if they are not under control, then we have to do something about that. So, and, it is going to be hard to control with Northern Iraq and Syria, the continuing and growing active struggle inside Turkey. So, we’ll have to take steps of some kind but you can be sure that concern for human rights and democracy will be way down...
at the bottom of considerations. The main thing will be to establish what they call “stable governments” that control their populations and do the kind of things that we want. In case of Turkey, that means leave the US free to use Eastern Turkish bases. Make sure Turkey does not step out of line on Iran…. Iran which is the world’s greatest threat to peace—a view only held in the U.S., the West, and Israel…. 

Thus if things are not related to the U.S. interest or do not toe the government line, the media does not report it. The U.S. is completely isolated globally but the press won’t report it. Its like the Kurds, it doesn’t matter what happens. The U.S. has its commitments to domination and power, and the press goes along and the intellectual community goes along. There are a couple of independent people like John Tirman, for example, who did some interesting work on atrocities on the Kurdish population in the 1990s. I think, as far as the Kurds are concerned, there is an old Kurdish saying, I am sure you know, “Our only friends are the mountains.” It’s more or less true. But, as things are developing in the regions, there is some chance that there might be some moves toward the integration of the Kurdish regions and some degrees of autonomy. And, I think probably, the growing oppression in Turkey is partly out of concern for this…. As long as the Kurds are under control, no will pay attention. That’s the way, it works.

DN: Thank you very much. It has been an honor and a pleasure.