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# HOW LEGITIMATE ARE THE KURDS' DEMANDS? THE KURDISH QUESTION THROUGH THE LENS OF TURKEY'S WEST

YILMAZ ENSAROĞLU  
DİLEK KURBAN



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YAYINLARI**

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TESEV YAYINLARI

**Authors:** Yılmaz Ensarođlu, Dilek Kurban  
**Prepared for publication by:** Ebru İlhan

**Translator:** Fethi Keleş

**Design Supervisor:** Rauf Kösemen, Myra  
**Cover Design:** Banu Yılmaz Ocak, Myra  
**Page Layout:** Myra

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**Türkiye Ekonomik ve  
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*Turkish Economic and  
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*Democratization Program*

Bankalar Cad. Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 3  
Karaköy 34420, İstanbul  
Tel: +90 212 292 89 03 PBX  
Fax: +90 212 292 90 46  
info@tesev.org.tr  
www.tesev.org.tr

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**YILMAZ ENSAROĐLU - DİLEK KURBAN**



# Introduction

As 2008 drew to a close, we published a report entitled “A Roadmap for a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region to the Government” (“TESEV 2008 Report” or “Report”).<sup>1</sup> Published by TESEV Democratization Program, the report offered a systematic arrangement of opinions, demands and analyses we gathered on the Kurdish Question, as a result of meetings and correspondence with individuals from as many different political leanings as possible, and with as much representative capacity in Kurdish public opinion as possible. Upon its publication, the report triggered several important discussions and many studies continue to cite it. This was a consequence due in large measure to the fact that the Report literally delivered the recommendations and demands concerning primary and substantive issues put forth by Kurdish politicians, academics, local administrators, experts and representatives of non-governmental organizations who come from diverse social, political and philosophical backgrounds, and are well-informed and experienced in different aspects of social life.

Some time after the publication of the Report, the government launched a process called the “Kurdish Initiative”. The name was quickly changed, first, to “Democratic Initiative” and then to “National Unity and Brotherhood Project”. It should be noted that the process –without regard to how it is called- increased awareness of, and promoted discussions on, the Kurdish Question by broader segments of society. Nevertheless, several individuals and organizations accused the government of failing to come up with tangible policies toward the solution of the problem and to share its plans and projects to that end with the public, after several search conferences around the idea of the ‘initiative’ and the passage of almost two years. In other words, it has been argued frequently that the initiative launched by the government did not meet the public’s and particularly the Kurdish community’s expectation for a solution. Furthermore, the endless bickering of politicians and securitized, polarizing debates, which feed the tension in public, prevented large segments of society from gaining sound information on the problem and developing opinions through a calm and solution-oriented exchange of ideas. As a result, the ‘initiative process’ seriously increased awareness of the Kurdish Question, but it did not enable the production of enough data on how the society in general perceives the matter, how Kurds meet their demands or the kind of solution that might be reached, the policies to reach that solution, and the time needed to implement those policies.

The June 2011 general elections may be fast approaching, but it is still unclear whether the government and the opposition have detailed assessments and policies towards a democratic solution to the Kurdish Question. As a matter of fact, there is more to the problem than politics and conflict or economic backwardness, and it is not appropriate to confine it within the bounds of politics. The path to a solution is not going to be cleared if the social dimension of the problem is neglected and the non-Kurdish members and segments of society residing in Turkey are not given consideration, and if a blind eye is turned to those segments’ perceptions of the problem and the demands of Kurds.

Despite all the pain, loss of lives and property, that is, although a substantially heavy price has been paid thus far, the majority of Turkish society is yet to encounter the Kurdish Question directly. Although one might say that the local population living in coastal Turkey had limited encounters with Kurds who had seasonal and temporary agricultural jobs since their forced displacement, due first to economic reasons and later for security reasons, to the country’s west in the 1990s, these encounters may be challenging and traumatic, especially for the Kurds<sup>2</sup>. In addition, often when the residents of Black Sea, Aegean and Mediterranean regions of the country ‘encounter’ Kurds, who are victims of forced migration, they do not consequently develop a deeper understanding of the Kurdish

1 Yılmaz Ensaroğlu and Dilek Kurban, *A Roadmap for a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region to the Government* (TESEV, 2008) (hereafter, “TESEV 2008 Report”).

2 The cities of Mersin, Trabzon and Izmir, where the roundtable discussions of this project have been held, have received Kurdish migration on different periods and based on different dynamics and reasons. Similarly, the relationship between the Kurdish migrants and the non-Kurdish residents of these cities evolved differently across time in each city or across the three cities concerned. Surely, this Report is not a sociological analysis on the nature, reasons, dynamics and implications of Kurdish migration into cities in Turkey’s west. Instead, it reads as a collection and analysis of opinions expressed by participants in roundtable discussions held as part of a project.



Question, the phenomenon on which those encounters are based. Nonetheless, a solution inevitably requires that one faces the question and arrives at a sound diagnosis to define it as accurately as possible. Refraining from or evading that requirement, or neglecting or concealing the question, would only lead to an impasse. Thus, with the exception of a few individuals and organizations that monitor the Kurdish Question closely, Turkish people build their understanding and opinions on the issue through following the mainstream media, and address the question itself only when a soldier's funeral is held in their respective villages or towns. This sort of an engagement with the Kurdish Question, needless to say, is not only problematic, but also presents serious risks for social peace. Moreover, open exchange and discussion of opinions between different segments of society will also help the establishment of democratic culture and the creation of the necessary conditions for coexistence. Only with this and similar methods can policy proposals for decision-makers acquire public legitimacy.

Until recently, the Kurdish Question was mostly limited to the relations between Kurds, actually one group of Kurds, and the state, and it had not yet become a social problem. Some recent events particularly in Turkey's western provinces point to the likelihood of tension, even conflict, between Turks and Kurds. Reaching a solution while keeping social harmony intact will be possible if different segments of society take part in the process of discussion and solution, that is to say, if everyone is ensured to have a chance to communicate their take on a solution. While the lion's share of responsibility in this regard falls upon the shoulders of political circles including first of all the government, there is no doubt that the media, intellectuals, universities and especially non-governmental organizations also have important roles to play.

Accordingly, we opened to debate the 2008 TESEV report, which effectively compiled Kurds' opinions and demands, in western provinces where Kurds do not constitute the majority of the total residents. To that end, we held five roundtable discussions, two in İzmir and one each in Mersin, Trabzon and Ankara, with participants living in those cities *and* in neighboring cities. We invited individuals from as many different ethnic, cultural and political communities as possible, and aimed to bring participants into a discussion on both Kurds' demands on the basis of the 2008 report and their own respective approaches, objections, concerns and expectations.

The main goal of preparing and publishing the Report was to identify as accurately as possible how the voices of Kurds, the group with a primary stake in the question, are perceived around Turkey, which of their demands are considered reasonable and which are deemed unacceptable, and to act as an intermediary helping with the presentation of the opinions of non-Kurdish segments of society on the Kurdish Question to the public opinion.

## Methodology and Objective

Over the course of approximately one year from March 2009 to February 2010, five one-day roundtable meetings were held in the provinces of İzmir, Mersin, Ankara and Trabzon on the following dates: 7 March 2009 (İzmir); 9 May 2009 (Mersin); 14 May 2009 (Ankara); 14 November 2009 (İzmir-Aegean regional meeting) and 13 February 2010 (Trabzon-Black Sea regional meeting). Although meetings were initially planned to be held on a provincial basis, at the suggestion of participants in the first meeting in İzmir who pointed to the sensitivity the Kurdish Question carries in the Aegean region in general, regional meetings were also conducted. Participants from neighboring provinces were invited to the second meeting in İzmir and the Trabzon meeting. While the Aegean regional meeting was attended by individuals from İzmir, Aydın, Uşak, Muğla, Denizli and Kütahya, the Black Sea regional meeting hosted participants from the provinces of Trabzon, Rize, Giresun, Ordu, Samsun and Gümüşhane.

The provinces and regions where meetings took place were selected purposefully. As meeting participants emphasized frequently, İzmir and Mersin received large groups of Kurdish migrants, and the two provinces have come to be known as places where communal tensions between Kurds and non-Kurds broke out frequently. Moreover, it is widely believed that the Black Sea region, especially the province of Trabzon, is a city where nationalist currents are stronger than they are in the rest of the country and where the prejudiced and strong views of the city folk on the Kurdish Question are largely non-negotiable. Therefore, holding a regional meeting in Trabzon was considered a useful step in identifying potentially the stiffest reactions against Kurds' demands. And a meeting with senior bureaucrats, politicians and scientists was held in Ankara because it is the seat of the Turkish state, and demands voiced by Kurdish opinion leaders in the 2008 report were shared with decision-makers.

Participants were solicited by invitation, and all meetings were private and closed. Participants were invited to offer their personal opinions and not to represent the organizations they are affiliated with, and these conditions were notified to them both in the run-up to and over the course of the meetings.

The meeting in Ankara differed from the others in terms of the procedures followed to identify and invite participants, due to differences in the nature of the meetings. Participants invited to meetings in Mersin, Trabzon and İzmir were selected mostly at the suggestion and mediation of individuals who resided in the city where the meeting was to be held and had a keen understanding of that city's political and social dynamics. While sometimes participants did not reside in a given province, they were in any case selected at the recommendation of individuals who knew that province well. Connections with participants were established through the above-mentioned intermediaries. Correspondence took place over telephone and e-mail, and involved a summary of the work that had been undertaken since the time of the TESEV 2008 Report until then, as well as information on the objective and agenda of the meeting to which that individual was invited; in addition, opinions and recommendations were received on who else might be invited to the same meeting. Thus, the snowball method was used to identify participants. Contacts who agreed to participate in the meeting were sent a copy of the TESEV 2008 Report through electronic and surface mail so that they could read it prior to the meeting.

Much attention was paid to ensure that invitees came from as many different ethnic backgrounds as possible. But of course, participants were distinguished by more than their respective ethnic origins and native languages. They were, additionally, individuals with miscellaneous political/ideological leanings, distinct cultural backgrounds, varying professional affiliations and very dissimilar sets of experiences. The distribution of the 104 participants in the five meetings across the provinces and meetings was as follows: İzmir I (12); Mersin (16); Ankara (14); İzmir II (Aegean regional meeting) (25); and Trabzon (Black Sea regional meeting) (37). In addition, participants had the following professions: Representatives of non-governmental organizations (42); politicians (15); bureaucrats (2); academics (4); attorneys (8); local government representatives (5); representatives of professional associations (4); trade union representatives (8), educators (3), business people (1); journalists (5); authors (6) and cartoonist (1).

The Ankara meeting, however, hosted members of parliament identified in view of their differences in political vision and their knowledge, experience and/or interest in the Kurdish Question, and affiliated with political parties represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, TBMM*). As with the meetings in other provinces, the members of parliament (MP) were notified before and during meetings that they were being invited to represent their own personal opinions and not the official lines of the political parties they were affiliated with. While some MPs of the Justice and Development Party<sup>3</sup> (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Ak Parti*) and the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP*) accepted the invitation, those of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP*) and Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP*) did not attend the meetings. Also asked to attend the Ankara meeting were senior bureaucrats from institutional bodies such as the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of the Interior, Radio and Television Supreme Council (*Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu, RTÜK*), Turkish Radio and Television (*TRT*), Ministry of Justice, Foreign Ministry, Ministry of National Education, Religious Affairs Directorate, National Police, Secretariat General for EU Affairs, Regional Development Authority of the Southeastern Anatolia Project. However, in attendance were only two representatives commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior. Academics and representatives of non-governmental organizations in Ankara knowledgeable about and specializing in the Kurdish Question were invited as well to contribute to the debate.

The meetings were mostly held in three sessions. Participants offered their general remarks on the Kurdish Question and the initiative in the first session. Ideas and critiques concerning the TESEV 2008 Report were shared in the second session. In the third and final one, exchanges were related to specific problems Kurds living in the meeting region encountered and relations they had with the rest of the society there. Opinions and recommendations voiced at the meetings and subsequently delivered to TESEV in writing were compiled and edited by the authors and organized into a text. Rather than being a document prepared jointly and eventually approved by participants, this report is instead a study penned by the authors on the basis of participants' opinions. Participants enriched the meetings with their valuable suggestions, and all of their opinions were taken into consideration. When a given set of ideas was similar or closely related to another, the most comprehensive one was taken as basis, while others were incorporated into various points of the text. In other words, those paragraphs where participants' comments are quoted directly may contain quotes from multiple persons; and, some paragraphs may be summaries of a handful of comments made by several participants. Diligence was thereby exercised to ensure that no thought that was offered was excluded from the report.

In the following parts of the Report, participants' suggestions and assessments are grouped in terms of their content and approach, and presented in four sections. Section 1 discusses main ideas about the Kurdish Question. What do participants make of the Kurdish Question? How do they define it, what are their thoughts on different terms? In addition to these and similar questions, participants' views on the 'initiative' issue which remained on top of the national political agenda throughout 2009 are discussed in the same section.

Section 2 mainly offers a discussion of participants' opinions about the TESEV 2008 Report. Among the demands in that report, which are considered necessary to be met, acceptable or reasonable, and additionally, which are seen as radical and unacceptable? Participants' views, concerns and expectations are categorized and discussed on the basis of the Report's sections around these and similar questions.

Section 3 takes up the local/regional manifestations of the Kurdish Question in terms of local experiences and problems. Accordingly, what are the challenges faced by Kurds who live outside of Turkey's Eastern and Southeastern regions? What are the issues before the Kurds who were displaced or forced to migrate internally, and what complaints do their fellow residents raise as to the challenges they think are due to the presence of Kurds in their locales? In sum, the section seeks to analyze perceptions and ideas of the people living in the relevant provinces and regions on the topics of Kurds, the Kurdish Question, problems of Kurds and problems arising due to Kurds.

Section 4 deals with remarks and recommendations on solutions voiced at the meetings. The following section 5 evaluates the Ankara meeting and provides political decision-makers' opinions on the feasibility of Kurds' demands. Finally, the Report's concluding section offers a general discussion and makes policy recommendations for the formation of the social conditions and consensus necessary to solve the Kurdish Question.

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as AKP.



# SECTION ONE



# General Remarks on the Kurdish Question

Generally speaking, it is fair to say that there was consensus in all meetings that the Kurdish Question is Turkey's most important challenge and blocks the country's path in many ways, and that it calls for an urgent solution. But participants raised quite different viewpoints, diverse and at times diametrically opposite approaches on how to name and define the issue, reasons for the problem's emergence, its origins or the paths to solution. Nevertheless, when specifics of the matter were laid on the table, these opposing views converged, and even reached agreement. This is a sign that the long-lasting policies implemented to create a society of fear have had a certain degree of influence but could not subjugate the society entirely. As a matter of fact, it needs to be noted that at the meetings held in provinces assumed to harbor highly negative opinions on the Kurdish Question, even those participants who define themselves as nationalists (*milliyetçi*) or secular nationalists (*ulusalcı*) and are expected to react most harshly and irreconcilably to Kurds' demands often did not draw their "red lines" too far from those drawn by people with more moderate views. For instance, the majority of those participants stated clearly that Kurds' demands about human rights and Turkey's democratization were legitimate and their reaction or concerns were limited to demands regarding 'terror', the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK*) and Abdullah Öcalan.

General views on and approaches to the Kurdish Question can be discussed under the following headings:

## NAMING AND DEFINING THE QUESTION

### "IT IS THE KURDISH QUESTION"

A great majority of the participants emphasized that the issue first of all needed to be named correctly so that it may be solved, and that it must be called the 'Kurdish Question'. The views voiced by this majority are mainly based on the argument that sound diagnosis and proper terminology are a must for a permanent solution. But the justifications given for the views varied. While some participants, offering a historical analysis, suggested that the problem had its roots in the ethnic nationalist philosophy of the state, which was adopted over the course of nation-state building, others noted that what mattered was how the people aggrieved by the issue called it and that is why it needed to be called the Kurdish Question.

A participant with Islamic sensitivities pointed that the Kurdish Question was distinct from Turkey's other democratization issues, because it was essentially a problem of identity, and emphasized that the discourse suggesting Turks and Kurds are "brothers in faith", to which the government also subscribes, falls short of comprehending and explaining the question:

Call it the Kurdish Question, and you're already halfway through reaching a solution. Most of the issues discussed under the rubric of the Kurdish Question are frequently claimed to be issues faced by the public at large. But there is a difference in their case, and it is that Kurds were not able to express their problems and demands. They were kept under pressure. Other matters can be discussed as part of democratization. Brotherhood in faith won't be enough by itself. Having Adam and Eve as ancestors is not enough for the Kurds. The Kurdish brothers who kept us company in the pre-12-September era and were Islamists at that time are Kurdish nationalists first, and then Islamists, today. But if there's a demand to have the PKK and Öcalan issue dealt with as part of the Kurdish Question and to exact a revolutionary, sudden change, the public won't swallow that pill very easily, and then we'll have a serious Turkish Question this time. So, these are problems that need to be solved within a general democratization framework.

Another participant with Islamic sensitivities emphasized that the question should be named as such, given the oppressive and assimilationist policies implemented by the very Turkish state against Kurds ever since the inception of the Turkish Republic:

To have a grip on the matter, we need to name it the right way. I think it's not wrong to call it the Kurdish Question; actually, the Kurdish Question is an issue belonging in the modernization of Turkey. Where you use the word "Turk", it

is only natural and justified to use the word “Kurd”. Kurds have reacted against the top-down modernization attitude. Kurdish people have historically lived far from the center and autonomously, and they backlashed against central government’s modernization attempts. Turkish modernization movement targeted the Kurds twice: First because they were not Turks, and second because they were Muslims. And they could not be assimilated because they were not a small group.

Expressing a similar opinion, a socialist participant recounted the successive phases in which assimilationist policies toward Kurds had been put in place since the foundation of the Republic and noted how senseless it was today to still debate what to call the problem:

There are deputies representing Kurdistan in the Assembly in 1921, and then in 1924 ‘everybody is Turkish’. After that you have the Turkification of Kurdish names, and then they say ‘there is no Kurd’, and Kenan Evren bans the Kurdish language, and you have the massacres of those celebrating the Newroz while in prison. Followed by seventeen thousand extrajudicial killings. And yet we’re still debating the name of the question.

Suggesting that Kurds’ subjective perception is what mattered, another participant offered the following to note that the decisive designation would be the one used by the people who are suffering from the problem:

Kurds in Turkey don’t want to secede; in fact they are striving to not part ways. One needs to see that. If the people in the region refer to their problem as the Kurdish Question, let it be just that.

### “IT’S A DEMOCRATIZATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTION”

Most of the participants who opposed using ‘Kurdish Question’ to name the issue preferred a definition of the matter within the framework of democratization and human rights. Proponents of this preference need to be grouped into two: The main concern shared by those in the first group is the fear of a break-up and division of the country and mutual reinforcement of nationalist sentiments. The following observations of a participant sum up this view quite neatly:

Differences need to be viewed in a positive light. We should not resort to violence as a method. Where you have violence, there you have the dialogue of the deaf; no one bothers to listen to the other. We need to look for a solution that gives priority to the human being, not to territory. Nationalism, chauvinism produce a counter-nationalism. The discourse we will use in solving the problem is very important. It is necessary to understand the matter as an issue of rights and justice, and that’s ground to build a solution upon. Everybody should be allowed to seek justice, but at the same time we need to be aware of the micro-nationalism instigated by global capitalism and imperialism to secure their own future, we should avoid their traps. Everyone should be entitled to their rights freely, obstacles before that should be removed, but schemes with divisive intent should be opposed. Constitutional amendments required to that end must be made, and local governments should be reinforced so that it is possible to give people the habitats they need.

The second group is composed of individuals approaching the matter through a path of principles and values, and on a democracy and human rights ground. They think that a durable solution to the Kurdish Question would require satisfaction of Kurds’ demands to rights arising from their distinct identity. According to them, the issues Kurds complain about have in fact repercussions on the entire nation and society. Thus, a solution would come about if arrangements and policies that cover all are devised.

Some of the participants subscribing to this line of thinking argued that Kurds, just like other peoples, may not be prevented from exercising their right to enjoy and develop their own language and culture:

Kurds wish to live together with Turks, but they also want to have equal rights. Or, they want to be able to exercise their own rights. In other words, Kurds want to be considered no less human beings than Turks, to be treated humanely; just like Turks, they would like to enjoy their own culture and language and thrive in that culture and language. For what makes a human being a human being is language, culture and faith. God has created mankind in different nations so that they may get to know, converse and mingle with each other. I wish the government engaged in a conversation with Kurdish intellectuals and the Kurds. That way, the problem would have been solved much more easily on a democratic basis.

Democratization needs to be considered within the context of Turkey’s unity. We need to lay claim to our cultural heritage without provoking ethnic origins and fuse our cultural heritage with economic development.

Others have underlined that the main issue in Turkey is the prevailing mindset seeking to form a uniform society, and Kurds have had their share of assimilation and pressure emanating from that system, but emphasized that Kurds were not alone in that regard:

Discrimination and antidemocratic practices affect not just the Kurds. If real peace is achieved in Turkey, a rehabilitation program needs to be implemented in the country's west simultaneously with the rehabilitation to be geared toward Kurds. That's the only way to do away with the discrimination in the society.

Actually, there is no problem between the peoples; the problem in Turkey is one of mindset. Many identities were excluded for the sake of creating a singular nation. One issue has to do with language. For instance, my child is unable to comprehend the works of Mehmet Akif. Though it's alright to distinguish the problems of Kurds from those of Turks in a systematic sense, it's quite wrong to assume that Kurds are claiming rights from Turks and Turks have no problems at all. But in any case, we should always stand by those who are seeking their rights and criticize the dominant power. But there is the issue of language to be able to do just that. The report has an emphasis on Kurdish women, Kurdish children. Are the problems of Assyrian, Arab, Turkish or Turkmen women in the slums of Diyarbakır any different? We need to understand this struggle as the demand of all Anatolian folk, including Sunnis, Alevi, Kurds, Turks, to have their share of power.

This problem did not come into being because of Kurds. It is a question of identity and it's got three dimensions: There is the official identity created by constructing mindsets. And then there is the natural identity, which a person does not have control over. It is necessary to know that denying natural identities or imposing a different identity amounts to inhumane treatment. And there is also the discretionary identity, which involves a culture or desire of living together.

Religious/conservative participants with Islamic sensitivities who are in the above-mentioned second group and understand the question as a matter of democratization and freedom advanced the following opinions:

When you call it the Kurdish Question, you're implicitly saying that Kurds themselves and their very existence is a problem. So, we need to avoid that name and formulate the issue in relation to Kurds by recognizing that the problem essentially is a consequence of the structure and mentality of the state. A comprehensive solution is possible if the system itself is seen as the source of the problem. So we need to understand that the problem is not with Kurds, it is with the structure and mindset of the state. If we fail to see the problem with the state, it will linger on at lower levels. We need to come up with recommendations that would lead to a solution of both the Kurdish Question and other issues. So a change is needed in the perspective of Turkey's official ideology. Let's not see it as a Kurdish Question only. It is a complete matter of constitutional and legal system, a matter of freedom and democracy. Therefore, naming it the 'Kurdish Question' is rather disadvantageous for both sides. The overarching problem in Turkey is democratization.

Similar approaches have been offered by some socialist participants as follows:

If we can step out of our own ideologies and then consider the issue, we can solve the problem. Recommendations based on a notion of race will not contribute anything to a solution. It is a problem that has to do with the oppressor and the oppressed. It is not a Kurdish Question, but a democratization question. We need to grasp and solve the problem in a way exploiters would not desire, that is, on a national basis.

The same participants, however, also objected to a definition of the Kurdish Question on an ethnic basis:

No one has an independent initiative in relation to this matter. The socialists understand it to be a class issue and wish that everyone has an equal and free life; they yearn for a world where there is no distinction in terms of religion, ethnicity, etc. The religious ones imagine a solution under the rubric of Islam, by suggesting we're all God's subjects. But neither group is able to appeal to the complicated nature of the realities. Kurds who are politically socialized are conscious. Thirty years ago, we socialists were accused of being Kurdish nationalists. Socialists have paid a heavy price and underwent many instances of oppression in this country due to their class-based struggles as Kurds. We need to understand the people. The Kurdish Question is of course a problem created by Kurds. After all, they are revolting against the state with a claim for "recognition". But I am against a politics conducted through Turkish – Kurdish ethnicities. Political conduct must be based on common values in this country. No one should have their identities, religious perceptions, political views questioned. People should be tried in accordance with the principle of the rule of law. So, the first thing to do is strip the question of ethnicity or nationalist discourse.

The fact of PKK and the violence got the state and the society thinking about this question. Politicized Kurds address the system through that identity and demand recognition by the state as such. They want a new Constitution. But as a socialist, I am against a Constitution containing references to Kurdish ethnicity. We need to conduct political activity on the basis of common values in the country. The problem is a matter of democracy and organization. We need to remove religion and ethnicity out of the equation and discuss the matter in terms of rights.

Some Islamist participants offered the following reasons to object to the above idea that the identity aspect of the matter should not be highlighted:



Sunnis, Alevi, leftists have indeed been oppressed by the official ideology, but they have nevertheless been speaking their own native languages. Kurds, however, were subjected to the additional trauma of being barred from speaking their own language. Banning the language is in fact a practice that has to do with assimilation. It aims to transform. When you prohibit the language, you're also blocking the entire cultural memory society has produced over the centuries as well as the practices that live through that memory. That prohibition will inevitably come back to us in the form of an identity issue seeking to survive through language. So, the Kurdish Question is not, as was argued often a while ago, a matter of economic backwardness. If it were, we would have seen this and similar issues in other parts of the country that are economically backward. We don't see that, and that means the issue has to do with identity and the language which that identity is based on and strives to keep alive.

Another Islamist participant emphasized that the bulk of the responsibility at the present lied with the Turks who need to make an effort to understand how the ban on their languages and the denial of their identities caused Kurds to suffer:

It's not the Kurdish Question only, the Yezidis are among the most ancient tribes around here, and in their experience in the Ottoman times, they lived in peace for centuries in their native territories, but after the establishment of the Republic, they all had to disperse across European countries, and this is something to be questioned loud and clear by Turks today. We should not forget that a durable solution will be found when we Turks begin to empathize first of all. For instance, Kurdish author Muhsin Kizilkaya was severely beaten by the teacher on duty just because he wanted to speak, hug and cuddle and converse in Kurdish with his mother when she came to visit him at the boarding school and attempted to establish that most humane, most innocent, most existential of dialogues between a mother and a son; unless we Turks feel his wounds in our heart, the issue won't find a solution in people's conscience.

#### **“THE KURDISH QUESTION IS A SCHEME BY FOREIGN POWERS”**

Some participants, however, thought that the Kurdish Question is totally an “imperialist scheme” thrown at Turkey by foreign powers that are still active to keep it unsolved. According to the proponents of this idea, without the activities of foreign countries and terror organizations in connection with them that seek to weaken the Turkish state, there would have been no Kurdish Question, and what is more, there would have been no issue not only between Turks and Kurds but also between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between Sunnis and Alevi. Ideas along these lines are mostly voiced by participants who define themselves as nationalists or secular nationalists, and they can be summarized as follows:

The phrase ‘Kurdish Question’ is objectionable as the name of the issue. The Kurdish Question is no different from the question of coups. As a matter of fact, the question of coups which interrupted democracy is a more dominant problem than the Kurdish Question. Are the 15-year-old teenager or the 80-year-old grandmother who take to the streets in the Southeast aware of what they are doing when making that hand gesture, or is there a problem of interaction there? Why did the Kurdish Question become a hot issue? The people in the Black Sea or Aegean, Thracian regions swallowed it up, they didn't take their guns and rush to streets. But that's not what happened in the Southeast. The foreign powers did

To grasp the question accurately, it is important to lay bare the sources behind it. The Kurdish Question has a history of about a hundred years. It dates even further back. Who are the actors in this issue? When imperialist powers set up the international system, part of their plans included a design over the Kurdish region. Aside from the issue of welfare which is a problem common to all peoples, the problem put forth as the Kurdish Question is a consequence and manifestation of an imperialist project attempting to weaken Turkey. In 40 years, this country paid a price of 300 billion dollars. I believe that Kurds of this country who live outside of that region have important perspectives to contribute to this problem. In sum, this issue first of all has to do with foreign powers. Second, the Kurdish Question is a problem of democratic rights and concerns Turkey as a whole.

Some participants identified the “foreign powers” as Western countries, and attributed their intervention in Turkey's internal affairs to a lack of foresight on the part of Turkish politicians:

Those holding power (the Western countries) keep a close eye on other countries and analyze them carefully to ensure the continuity of their hegemony. They think that Turkey falls within the realm of their hegemony. That's how they want things to stay. They fuel certain conflicts (such as Alevi-Sunni, Turk-Kurd) when they see fit, and expand and reinforce their hegemony as such. The problem results from our politicians not foreseeing and analyzing and solving the issues before others intervene.

Foreign and domestic parties sabotaging the process are in fact destroying the ground for peaceful coexistence. Foreign dynamics impact domestic actors so that the problem is solved to their satisfaction.

A participant suggests that the Kurdish Question is neither the first nor the last 'scheme' devised by "imperialists" against Turkey:

That part of the problem related to terror has completed its mission. This is not a question that will go away with our talking. Before the 1980s, there was the ASALA, once it fulfilled its mission, another problem was created for Turkey to deal with after 1980, with the bans on Kurdish language and the pressure on Kurdish identity. Today, the Kurdish Question has also completed its mission. Another imperialist effort is now in the offing under the pretext of regional leadership. Imperial powers, including first of all the USA, want to craft a regional leader out of Turkey. Can we take advantage of that? Of course, as long as we have the willpower and control... In order for Turkey to realize its mission in the Arab and Muslim world, the country needs to take care of its own problems. But in any case, there is no reason why Kurdish and Turkish peoples should not coexist.

While suggesting that international powers are the source of the problem, another participant said further that the solution also depended on foreign powers and the current moment provided an opportunity:

The hegemonic powers of the world seek to find the Achilles' heel of each society and find the means to intervene. And they always have domestic collaborators to aid them with the interventions in a given country. That's how societies' zones of activity shrink, and they are prevented from coming up with their own solutions for their own problems, and their confidence is destroyed. The Kurd-Turk, Alevi-Sunni, Muslim-non-Muslim designations and tensions are seen as points of conflict that are open to foreign intervention. You can add to that the secular-antiseccular division, too. Over the history, our strategy toward these conflicts has been one of denial and negligence only. The *status quo* was maintained without undoing any assumptions or offering any interpretation, and there was no diversification as to conflict resolution strategies. This deficient strategy watered the mouths of hegemonic powers who had designs over this country, and they went about their schemes against our nation whenever they saw fit to reach their goals. Therefore, no solution would be within sight if we ignore the international dimension of the problems we're having and rely on shallow heroism, empty nationalism and other outdated methods. However, it appears that international conjuncture is favorable for reaching a solution.

There were additionally participants who objected to the designation of "Kurdish Question" on political or ideological grounds but did not express their opinions as to what constitutes a proper name. They need to be paid careful attention in order to grasp certain reactions and concerns that are very much prevalent in society. A summary of the views in that framework is offered below:

Without regard to whether we call it the Kurdish Question, the southeastern question, the colonial problem... your perspective matters. If you consider Kurds' relations with the state, you would have considered only one aspect of the issue and solved only that. When you look at the Kurdish region as a whole, - some fellows call that region 'Kurdistan', which I don't agree with - what are we to make of the Arabs, Assyrians who are living there, how are we to consider them? Shall we take them to be Kurds as well?

Do privileged Kurds have such a problem? The privileged Kurdish mafia does not have any problem like that. I see this as a regional issue and a matter of democracy. I believe seeing it as such will help find a solution. You can convince the public only with that kind of perspective. And without convincing the public, there's no way to reach a solution.

An injustice committed in a village in Diyarbakır concerns the life of a citizen living in Gümüşhane as well. This is a general issue of democratization. In terms of accessing democracy, the man in Diyarbakır is in the same situation as another in Bayburt's Üzengi village. In Turkey, we grant legitimacy to the winner of the ballot. Who elects those who win the ballot? The chairpersons of political parties select the candidates for members of parliament, ministers, mayors, provincial and district officers of their own parties, and then we call this democracy. In Turkey, you have theocracy [oligarchy] of leaders. If they wouldn't be ashamed of that, they would even go so far as to selecting the neighborhood headman. So, the bottom line is that you're not actually electing anyone, you're just casting your vote. With whom are you going to support democracy? That's not what democracy is. You can't defend democracy with a system that turns a blind eye to the human being. You can defend democracy only with people who are democratic. 70% of PKK members do not carry Turkish citizenship, half of those who support the Kurdish Question are not even Kurds.

I am against the phrase "Kurdish Question". If we absolutely need to use a term, "Kurds' question" is a more appropriate one. How is the PKK able to bring people to the mountains today, why do people take to the mountains, is that something we're trying to understand? Do Kurds have the freedom to express themselves individually? We cannot neglect the fact of social and political feudalism. We know very well how the Kurds who will go to the ballot are set to cast their votes. There's an international scheme that is benefiting from posing the "Kurds' question" as the "Kurdish Question". I think that holding meetings under the name of "Kurdish Question" in various provinces contributes to those policies, and this meeting is no exception.

Some participants mounted a wholesale objection against all efforts to name and define the issue and emphasized that more durable results will be achieved if the matter is discussed in its own natural course and develops as such. Following statements summarize the views shared by such participants:

As a social scientist, I think the debate over definitions is not without its uses. Depending on how you name the issue, socialists become part of the process, Islamist do the same etc. I find it good that the process moves slowly. I think that shows the process is being approached with diligence and there is a desire to digest it. It's useful to have a detailed and comprehensive discussion. Kurds have in fact been the medium through which more democracy is demanded all over the country.

## THE ORIGINS/CAUSES OF THE QUESTION

Not only the Kurdish participants, but also those who defined themselves as democrat, liberal, socialist or Islamist as well as non-Kurds have all stated that the main cause of the Kurdish Question are the years-long policies of denial, destruction and assimilation pursued by the state in line with its project of creating a homogenous society. As a matter of fact, these analyses did not meet any serious objection even from participants with nationalist leanings who see the problem as a scheme by foreign powers. The views expressed along this line can be said to center around the following arguments:

Just like many other problems that assumed a chronic character, the Kurdish Question stems from the state seeking to homogenize society. The state's untrusting attitude toward citizens of different ethnic groups living in Turkey, and its neglect of their histories, languages, geographies underlie not only the Kurdish Question but also the problems of peoples from other ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the statist discourse is what needs to be targeted first to be able to solve the Kurdish Question. Because, the state's denialist and discriminating discourse toward all different ethnic identities in general and the Kurdish identity in particular has begun to find a wide social base.

It is now patently obvious that policies based on destruction and denial over the course of the history of the Republic cannot solve the question. Reason, logic and common sense all require the use of means other than violence. Even the most natural, cultural, and even economic demands of Kurds were ignored by saying "Kurds are Turks who live in the mountains", no paths were left uncharted to assimilate and destroy Kurdish language, education and all public life denied a place for Kurdish, Kurdish children who don't speak Turkish were beaten in grade school and imposed fines and subjected to inferiority complex as such. In addition, with the village-guard system internal hostility was created among the Kurds. Kurds' rights were seized upon, which set the basis for the violence, massacres, and the discrimination. In fact, that situation led to uprisings and clashes throughout the history of the Republic, and domestic and foreign interests have spared no obstacle to prevent a peaceful-democratic solution of the problem, and they have derived substantial profit from the clashes and the bloodbath.

As the participants defined the question on the basis of oppressive state policies, they also offered certain recommendations for a solution. In that regard, they pointed to the importance of the discourse used toward Kurds as both the source and solution of the problem:

Kurds should not be seen as if they are 'problems'. The real problem in Turkey is the racist and unitary attitude of the state. Therefore, the 'separatist' label attributed to Kurds is both wrong and very disturbing. The state sees Kurds as troublemakers who need to be tamed, and defines them as a 'problem', 'separatist' and accuses them of terror. This discourse should be abandoned and a new one put in its stead.

Some participants pointed to the importance of the education system and textbooks, including first of all those on history, both as a source of the Kurdish Question and as a means to solution. In emphasizing that textbooks need to be re-written, some participants highlighted that such re-writing is important for crafting a new discourse toward Kurds, while others said it was necessary for Turkish society to be able to face its real history after being cheated by the official narrative that does not reflect the truth:

The unitary and discriminating language and discourse found in the Constitution and history textbooks need to be removed. Both the references that are discriminatory, and phrases such as unitary and one-nation in the Constitution must be replaced; and history textbooks must have room for Kurds' history. Likewise, necessary steps must be taken in relation to the issue of language, and obstacles before Kurds' using their native language must be lifted. As a matter of fact, making these amendments will solve the problems of not only Kurds but also other citizens with various ethnic backgrounds and different cultures. Notions of past offered in history textbooks are utterly nationalist and revolve around Turks, and rest everything upon Central Asia. History books contain no information on Kurds and other groups. On the very contrary, there are negative and racist references to them. If Kurds are seriously considered 'brothers', a brotherly space must be reserved for them in history books. Kurds need to be able to express themselves comfortably

in relation to their history and language. The state itself disseminates to the public the idea that Kurds are separatists. In sum, the denial that has been in effect with regard to Kurds over the many years must cease, and a notion of history must be developed that Kurds are an individual nation, which notion must have its place in history textbooks.

We now know that the history we have been taught is totally a lie. The history we're told is completely wrong. Even our most famous historians do not have room for the word Kurd in any of their publications. Moreover, the Minister of Interior, who is the coordinator of the Kurdish initiative, is giving a talk on the initiative and not even once he utters the word "Kurd". It took us many years to become aware that fifty thousand people were killed in Dersim.

Some participants noted that the Kurdish Question finds strength from the made-up environment of fear created by the state for the purpose of keeping the society in check:

We have been transformed into a society of fear through internal and external enemies. These perceptions of threat are being devised so that the society can be managed more easily. First of all, society needs to shrug off those fears. Unless light is shed on them, why they arise, whether there is any fact in them and then a struggle is launched against them, the fears will come to rule the people.

Along the same lines, some participants said Kurds were not the only targets of the state's uniformist policies of paranoia, and other peoples have been oppressed as well.

I am from Rize. For eighty years, this country has been offered a narrow notion of history and society. We told on our friends in grade school because they spoke the Laz language. It was as if all of us were little members of JİTEM. Why, because the administrators, our seniors guided us that way. This is first of all a problem of creating uniformity, of melting differences in a single pot. (...) Even today, when the most ignorant kids go to serve their military terms, they are being brainwashed by their commanders in a militarist and ultra-right-wing discourse, and they are led to believing they are all heroes and that's how they are conscripted.

I define myself as an Islamist. I've been involved in conservative nationalism for fifteen years, I studied at Gazi University in Ankara. But I know that the Qur'an says "I created you in different tribes so that you may know each other". I have the responsibility and religious duty to protect and sustain the languages of those who are different from me. The Kurd-Turk division is a test, and we need to find ways to protect our God-given features without 'othering' one another. My Islamic beliefs order me to protect the rights of every single person, without regard to whether the person is a fire worshipper. But we began talking about these issues only recently. We need to face that. We have been rendered into a uniform type after official ideological education, we were not able to find the middle course. Turks and Kurds have mutual rights of brotherhood dating back to hundreds of years.

Actually, the guy from Trabzon does not have any issues with the guy from Diyarbakır, Hakkâri or Tunceli. And I think they don't have any problem with the guy from Trabzon. Kurds have an issue with the administration and have problems among themselves. Since the inception of the Republic, some tribes sided with the state, while others stood against it. The socialists were always with the latter group. Of course, the ban on Kurdish language after 1980, changing village names are completely unacceptable and shameful practices. So, Kurds' identity claims are all very fair. But I have a different opinion when it comes to education in native language. What are you going to achieve with that? If a student studies law in Kurdish language, you will basically confine him to the Southeast, there is no way he can come to Trabzon and serve as a judge there. And therefore education in native language will yield nothing other than regional autonomy and division.

Some participants stated the main reason for the Kurdish Question was the state's securitist policies, and the forced displacements of millions of Kurds during the clashes between PKK and the Armed Forces brought the issue to a complete deadlock. The hostile and discriminatory attitudes disseminated through the media and national education infect the society, and the main obstacle before the solution was the mindset of the society, as these participants noted:

For years, the question has been reduced to a matter of security and public order, and almost a war was waged in the country for several years in the name of fighting terror. This climate of conflict and violence created millions aggrieved by forced migration including children, women, young people and seniors, and some of them were forced to migrate to the west, but people who were forcibly displaced were devoid of humane and healthy living conditions and stayed hungry, miserable and desolate, as if living in exile. Irregular urbanization pushed people toward an environment of theft, snatch-and-run, prostitution, drugs, which in turn produced economic and cultural degeneration. Local governments ran into trouble because they were not able to solve the problems of these people, and there were tensions and clashes arising from socio-economic and cultural structure. Some places still have those problems. Tens of thousands of people died, thousands of residential areas were reduced to ashes, billions of dollars went to waste, political cliques came into being, and criminal organizations within the state apparatus and their public extensions

caused the people to be constantly manipulated, and there were flag-related provocations in places such as Mersin. Obstacles were erected before the discussion, comprehension, and democratic and peaceful resolution of the problem, intellectuals and journalists who expressed views contrary to the official ideology were dismissed from their jobs, put in jail, silenced, disappeared and even murdered.

In parallel with the policy of seeing the problem as a matter of security and by charging the security forces with solving it, strong anti-Kurdish sentiments were created throughout the country by the state through media and education. To remove the chauvinism and racism incepted in people's subconscious, we all have a lot to do.

In Turkey you have a hostility created through the hand of state, and there is no desire to bring that to a halt. In a locale where congregants are composed of Kurds, the *imam* offers his sermon in Turkish because of the public officers who are in attendance. And the congregants react not to the *imam*, but to the public servants who are responsible for the situation, and as a result the public servants of the 'west' have to leave the mosque. This shows how Turks and Kurds, both being Muslims, can quickly come to a division even on a point which is otherwise considered their commonality and whose symbolic uniting role has come to be acknowledged all the time. This demonstrates that the policies implemented to date by the state are bound to crumble. As long as those policies are in place, no unifying element remains.

A Kurdish participant who has been living in the Black Sea region for a long time serves as a reminder of both the intertwining of the two societies and the rupture and division in minds and emotions:

We are faced with a problem that blocks Turkey's future. I have been living in a Black Sea province for 18 years. I am a teacher married to a lady from the Black Sea. The problem is at the same time a geographic problem. There is a people living in the Middle East, and they are called the Kurdish people; they want to enjoy their lives with equal rights and under honorable conditions of peace. They do not want anyone to grant their equal rights to them. They want to negotiate equality as joint decision-makers. If we limit the question to the region, we will be ignoring its extension in the Middle East. If Turkey does not solve the problem, after a while the country will be facing the regional extensions of it in the Middle East. If we consider the problem to be a matter of the region only, what do we do about the problems of Kurds in Istanbul? Everyone needs to their own questioning, the army, PKK, the state, everybody... The problem of the Kurd living in Istanbul is also a problem in itself...

## PARTIES TO THE QUESTION

The widespread confusion as to who the parties to the Kurdish Question are, or who Kurds' representative is, was also visible at the meetings. While some participants argued that Kurds are represented by DTP<sup>4</sup>, others referred to the percentage of votes garnered by DTP and emphasized that the authority to represent Kurds may not be granted to DTP alone. Similarly, it was discussed if the PKK was a party to the question, and while some participants saw PKK and the state as the parties to the question, others stated that the state will not accept a 'terrorist organization' as a counterpart and that organization may not be considered the representative of Kurds. Proponents of the latter view said the solution process must ensure that the society is involved widely. Additionally, almost all participants noted that Turks and Kurds must play their roles as parties to a social solution.

These debates mainly revealed the following: According to most participants, Kurds have a problem of representation and they are not able to express their views freely. They are receiving serious pressure from the state on the one hand, and from the PKK, on the other. Therefore, diverse voices are not heard in the political and civil lives of Kurds.

Following statements are clearly illustrative of these views:

No solution will be found if the real representatives of Kurds are not given consideration and the issue is not discussed with them. The actual parties to the problem are the PKK and the state. But the state has a dual structure: the army and the government.

They say DTP does not represent the Kurdish people. So, a political party that won 60-70% of the vote in the Southeast does not represent them, and AKP which is denying its Kurdish components does?

The state has been at war with the PKK for 35 years, that is, it considers the PKK as the counterpart, and then it says it will not consider them as such when it comes to peace negotiations. Whoever is party to that war will inevitably be involved in building the peace.

4 At the time of project launch, DTP was not shut down, but in its latter stages the political life of the party was brought to an end, and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was established. Therefore, some participants referred to DTP, and others to BDP. These references were kept intact as the report was being drafted.

With all that it did right and wrong, the PKK has become the political actor of the struggle there. Whether we like it or not. This is what public opinion in the west has started to grasp. That is, public opinion in the west can no longer be manipulated with terror propaganda.

There is no way to agree with the idea that “you will make peace with whoever was a party to the war”. You won’t make peace with your military uniform on.

Unless Turks are a party to the solution of the Kurdish Question, the issue will not be resolved. So, Turks need to be involved in the process and play an active role.

Peace is not the solution itself, it is a precondition for a people actually divided, subjected to discrimination, in uprising, silenced and oppressed. Similarly, laying down arms is not the solution. Peace and laid-down arms are necessary to be able to have a conversation. To proceed toward a solution, it won’t suffice if the state converses with its own Kurds or makes peace with them. Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce might have an idea about a solution, or the factory worker Kurd might have an idea about it. What matters is providing a context in which all of these things could be on the table, and solution proposals and demands by eighty percent of the population can be debated and discussed. We shouldn’t reduce the parties to the question to just two actors, on the contrary, a wide array of parties must be involved, and the entire society must partake in the solution.

Why is there no movement in the Kurdish political world other than DTP? For instance, why can’t Kemal Burkay engage in political activity in Diyarbakır? It is an ideological attitude to limit the parameters of a democrat identity to Kurds’ demands for rights, it is politics, and it does not imply a genuinely democratic approach. A genuine democratic approach is possible by going beyond that politics and ensuring democracy and pluralism within each movement.

75% of Kurds are said to be not supporting PKK, but what is the extent to which that group’s views are heard? Efforts must be made to remove the obstacles before those people speaking their minds.

One source of the problem in Turkey is that the issues of Kurds are being discussed as if there are no other problems in the country. As a trade unionist, I have collective bargaining problem, I have a resistance problem. If the aim is not set to offer a comprehensive solution to the problems of all groups, then there ensues a reaction. But if people know that the government aims to solve the problems of all, there will be trust.

Extended analyses can be offered around these participant views that focus on different matters. But the following participant’s statements are quite indicative that the public maintains common sense and sincerity no matter what, and offer important hints as to the where and how to look for a solution:

I am a Turk. In light of the developments, I am hopeful. First they said ‘there is no Kurd’. Then they granted there are Kurds. Over the course of a single day we had millions of Kurds. Then they had their own language. And some simple singing was grounds for detention. This matter is actually like a family business. It’s like a family where there are multiple wives and many children. As the authoritarian father, the state sticks its nose in everything. As a result, some children in the family leave home. They are the PKK. So these kids leaving home speak ill of the family outside and throw stones at the house. The father tells the other kids: “grab the weapon and go kill”. These other kids are the soldiers. This is to say the problem belongs to us all. We should stick to our will to live together as brothers no matter what. It is a good thing that the government began a debate on solving the Kurdish Question, but the exact content of the debate is not well known. For the first time, I see a report on this issue. It is critical that the AKP government is conducting an initiative. But we are yet to see a concrete plan from them.

## **POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENT/ THE INITIATIVE**

Remarks on government’s policies on the Kurdish Question, and especially on the initiative process that left its mark on 2009, fall on two main axes. Most of the participants are concerned whether the government and the ruling party are sincere and do not believe that the government will take serious steps. Conversely, others held that one needed to be hopeful of the government and that the current government was the likeliest to take the necessary steps toward a solution.

Participants who had a favorable opinion of government’s initiatives rested their opinions on the idea that the problem is now being openly discussed, which is a gain in and of itself en route to a solution. They pointed that the state and the society considered the problem a taboo, and that talking about that taboo now is a sign of transformation. They emphasized that it was natural for the process to be long and full of hoops, and advised patience.



AKP at least has succeeded in starting a debate on the Kurdish Question in the country. People who in the past got a creeping sensation from the sound of the word “Kurd” have now begun debating the Kurdish Question.

The government’s initiative is an attempt to bring together ideas and feelings. This is a modest approach. One needs to understand that. The government just ran into a subject matter on which there was no discussion for years. So we need to tolerate the government’s clumsy moves. The government set out to solve a problem that no political party thus far had the courage to deal with, it is only natural that mistakes will be made along the way. Instead of imposing its own solution, the government preferred to proceed through negotiations. Had the government acted differently, the bureaucratic apparatus would have stepped up to the plate right away and intervened in the process.

The current political configuration shows that AK Parti is the closest one to a solution. Therefore, it is necessary to support and encourage it.

There is a major difference between Democracy and Republic. Turkey is a Republic but needs to democratize. We appreciate that a democratic initiative has been brought to the agenda. We’re at least able to express our views. The problems of the present day have their origins in the praetorian system put in place by the 1961 Constitution. There were attempts to democratize the system after the ‘90s. The driving factor there was the EU process. That’s how Turkey gained awareness. There is a Constitutional Court whose decisions are not in favor of freedoms and rights. A latest example of this is the Court’s revocation of the amendment concerning the trial of soldiers in civilian courts. On the one hand you have Kurds’ problems, on the other the hand the issue of preferential treatment in university placement exams, the problem of unionization, fair trial, and that of the headscarf. We need to debate all of that. It is said that reforms in Turkey are undertaken only because the EU wants them. That’s right, but no political authority claiming to represent the people bothered to undertake these reforms at its own discretion.

However, participants who had a positive but nevertheless critical attitude to government’s policies advanced the argument that while the government set out on a search for a solution, it changed course after the closure case filed against AK Parti and modified its attitude otherwise targeting a solution:

The AK Parti government followed a promising policy until the time of the closure case, but after that they changed that policy completely and began following a statist one.

The trauma stemming from the closure case against AKP brought the solution of the problem to a halt.

Some of the same participants pointed that steps taken by the government should not be represented as more important and radical than they actually are:

Of course, there were positive steps. For instance, *TRT Şeş* is a good one. But there is no need to exaggerate the launching of a channel while there were already eight others broadcasting through satellite.

Participants who were less hopeful of the government and had a more negative and pessimistic attitude to current policies questioned AK Parti’s sincerity said the government would not have launched the initiative had the international conjuncture not imposed a solution.

Although *TRT Şeş* is a positive step, it is not sincere. Because it is not sincere, a lack of trust developed in the region vis-à-vis the government, as seen in the results of municipal elections. But instead of decoding the message delivered by the people in the region, the choice was to penalize DTP’s electoral success with operations. The Prime Minister had no contact until late with DTP which is the primary party to be addressed with respect to the solution of the problem, which was very wrong. Regardless, right now it is the DTP that represents Kurds. There were thoughts that AKP would follow a moderate policy, but Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan did not shake the hands of DTP members, which disappointed Kurds in their expectations.

The government is not sincerely pursuing a solution; the steps that have been taken were forced by the international community. If the government were instead to get together with Kurdish political institutions, the problem would be solved very easily. However, it appears that international forces and the government won’t leave the solution to the Kurds of Turkey. It is understood that a solution will be sought with the involvement of Obama, Talabani and Barzani. And the government turned its face not to its own Kurds, but to others. That is, AKP’s initiative is a solution excluding the Kurds. AKP talks about the solution with Barzani, with the USA, but not with Kurds themselves. The initiatives that were launched include Kurdish broadcasting and giving Kurdish names to children. Kurds’ actual demands are not touched upon.

Some other participants who were suspicious of the government pointed to the army as the element behind the government’s initiatives, instead of foreign countries and international conjuncture:

It is obvious that AKP's project is one created together with the army. This is because they are using the army's red lines. That is, those who have admitted to a Kurdish Question and seeking a solution are yet to understand that it is a problem of language and culture.

AKP failed to follow through with the first phase of the initiative. It approached the matter as an opportunity accorded by the conjuncture, instead of dealing with it in a principled manner, and that's why it failed.

## THE TONE OF THE DISCUSSION / THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOLUTION

Although it was not put on the agenda specifically, the tone to be adopted in expressing views in the short-run was considered in all meetings to be as important as, and sometimes more important than, the opinions voiced, and it is as if a consensus emerged that a thoroughly novel discourse needed to be developed for peace and solution. However, the statements made around this particular issue show that there is more to the problem than issues of style and language, and that there is a serious matter of law and ethics couched in terms of language, style and terminology. Regardless, this consensus must be regarded as one of the most important reasons why participants with opposing viewpoints continued to debate around the same table for one day. To lay bare the sensitivities of groups of people with diverse ideas, issues of style and language they find most disturbing, or the legal and ethical problems they pointed to, the following examples need to be considered.

While drawing attention to the importance of language and tone, some participants emphasized that both Turks and Kurds needed to be sensitive in that regard:

Kurds are offended, legitimately so, when the word "Kurd" is avoided and phrases such as "the southeast" or others are used. But Kurds' adopting a discourse along the lines of "you've been murdering us for the past eighty years" will contribute nothing to the solution process.

If opinion leaders, intellectuals had lived up to their responsibilities regarding the tone of their remarks, the discrimination which we complain has deepened would not have found this much ground among the public.

We need to craft a new language. When the state and Kurdish intellectuals address each other, they should not talk in a humiliating tone.

While some noted that Kurdish politicians in DTP needed to watch their language, they have not voiced any such expectation with respect to Turkish politicians:

The talks by Emine Ayna<sup>5</sup>, Osman Baydemir<sup>6</sup> are felt to have poisonous and stabbing effect here, and lead to an accumulation of hatred. Moreover, they coax people to discover their Turkish identity and to hold on to it. The language to be used should have an embracing impact. Without an attention to language and tone, many individuals holding disparate views begin to cluster around Turkish identity.

In addition, some participants stated that what mattered first and foremost was the language spoken by non-Kurds:

Statements to the tune of "Let's grant these rights to Kurds, and let's not grant them those" are rather very scornful, and as such they are not acceptable.

5 Member of Parliament from BDP (elected as an independent MP; then joined the ranks of DTP in the 23rd term of TBMM) representing the city of Mardin and former co-chair of DTP.

6 Mayor of Diyarbakir







# SECTION TWO



## Remarks on the Report

The two-day roundtable meeting held in Diyarbakır on 7-8 June 2008 constituted the ground for the TESEV 2008 Report, and it needs to be emphasized that attendance in that roundtable was very strong and productive, especially in terms of diversity and the representation of different political views and the voicing of divergent ideas. The meeting was attended by a wide array of participants ranging from representatives of the ruling party and opposition parties, local government, administrators of professional associations active in different areas, and officials of non-governmental organizations.

Despite this rich diversity, it was argued frequently in the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings that the Report had room for pro-PKK views only and views of the rest of the Kurds were not heard. Based on this, one needs to note that the public is not sufficiently informed about the Kurdish Question and Kurds' demands and this sets a serious obstacle before detailed analyses. As a matter of fact, even those participants who live in other parts of the country and can claim to certain intellectual background used the phrase "not Kurds', but PKK's demands" when they referred to those demands that have already acquired a normal and ordinary character among Kurds and advanced by almost all. This is a typical sign that there is no reliable flow of information and the issue is not being/ could not be monitored closely. Moreover, in meeting sessions where the Report was assessed, countless examples were seen of the fact that it is not just that the public at large has a problem of reliable information, but also that it is being forced to comprehend the developments and events under an incredible amount of disinformation by the media.

As stated above, these meetings looked for answers to such questions as how the public perceives the Kurdish Question, which Kurdish demands are considered 'reasonable' and which are seen as 'radical'. Views expressed around those issues are categorized and arranged on the basis of the themes discussed in the Report. Thus, analyses concerning the Kurdish Question in all its detail are found in this section of the Report.

Remarks offered on the Report, which have been categorized on the basis of Report's subheadings, focused mainly on the following issues:

### THE REPORT'S INTRODUCTION

The general remarks concerning the Report, or concerning the Kurdish Question through the Report, can be discussed under three main groups. Participants in the first group supported the Report itself as they considered it a step forward by itself.

Many of the recommendations in the Report are also found in the government's initiative program. Studies of this type on issues like this find the place they deserve as the issue comes to a fuller circle, although they don't yield direct results in the time period in which they are conducted.

The Report notes that the problem that has been going on between Kurds and the state has begun to turn into a social conflict, which is very important and needs to be given its due.

Approaching the Report in a positive light, a group of participants emphasized that the demands and recommendations in it must be paid attention to, but pointed to some issues they found to be lacking in the Report. Some of the views along those lines can be listed as follows:

The Report lays bare the matter very successfully and contains the most important demands and recommendations for solving the problem. The method used to prepare the Report is also productive and eye-opening. It is a well-planned and appropriate method to collect Kurds' demands and submit them to the government, which is the chief actor in solving the issue.

As the Report notes, the Kurdish Question is a political, economic and social problem. But it is essentially a problem of identity. The Report has not emphasized that, which is a significant deficiency.

Given its nature, the Kurdish Question is a regional issue. Kurdish population is not limited to Turkey, and therefore the question is an international one. Attempting to solve the problem only in the context of Turkey's dynamics is bound to fail. Unless it was a deliberate choice, that dimension is lacking in the Report.

Some participants were critical of the manner in which the Report discussed the question, its language, the concepts it used and the demands and recommendations it emphasized. The critiques need to be further divided into two. Some offer criticism on a ground of considering the Report's language and recommendations inadequate. Some even suggest that the Report is distorting Kurds' demands. The remarks below are illustrative of this approach:

There is no Kurdish Question in Turkey, but a Turkish Question. The state conducts Turkish Nationalism, and discriminates. Kurds want to acquire welfare where they live, they want self-determination, they want to govern themselves. The right of an almost 30-million strong group to do that cannot be denied. It is as if the Report is saying all that the Kurds want is bread and butter.

In future reports, more care needs to be exercised in the use of such terms as terror. When defining terror, all aspects of the problem need to be considered. For instance, the massacre in Mardin's Bilge village involved the use of weapons of the state. If that is not terror, then what is? The bones extracted out of the Botaş wells, if they are not terror, then what is? All of that is terror conducted in the name of the state.

It will be more appropriate to call the recommendations in the Report as 'demands from the state by citizens of the Kurdish race who have been subjected to anti-democratic practices'.

Meaning the initiative launched by the government, one participant voiced the opinion that the report became outdated in light of recent developments.

How the report is created, that is, how studies such as this report are put together are more important than what's in them. In other words, the process is more important. It is seen that the path forward will have its ups and downs. Each development necessitates a novel evaluation. Therefore, this report has been outdone by the current political practice. A new report is needed.

Adopting an otherwise very widespread attitude to the Kurdish Question, some participants emphasized the economic and social dimensions of the problem and ignored the political and cultural. Pointing to the 'feudal make-up' of the region, these participants see Kurds as a group without any internal variation among them, yielding to tribal pressures, incapacitated and submissive.

The Report includes no finding or recommendation concerning the undoing of the feudal structure. It only includes expectations from the state. However, the foremost economic and social troubles in the region stem from the prevalence of the feudal structure. It is interesting that there's no reference to it.

The report neglects the economic and historical dimensions of the Kurdish Question, as the issue is named in it, and mainly considers the pertinent political factors/causes. In that regard, recommendations demanding autonomy are being expressed, but before that there is a demand that the state fix the economy and income levels in the region. Similarly, the Report offers no recommendations for a solution concerning the feudal structure, a historical issue in the region, and criminal organizations including the PKK; this lack may not be considered a simple negligence.

Other participants acknowledged that the state needs to protect social differences through laws, but argued that the limits to that should be set in view of the principles entrenched in the unamendable articles of the Constitution.

Each of us needs to contribute all that we can in the field of rights and freedoms so that citizens can be more secure vis-à-vis the state, in the field of economy so that the distribution of income is more equitable, and in the social and cultural field so that we grant more respect to one another's language, religion and sect, and to approve of all that at the very least through a new constitution. However, such values as the flag, national anthem, national borders and national citizenship are the prerequisites of being a state and they are acknowledged by all the civilized countries, therefore we should not be divided on those and seek privileges with respect to them.

## **THE REPORT'S SECTION ON GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

In the "General Principles" section of the TESEV 2008 Report, the main emphasis was on the need for democratic participation in the designation and implementation of policies to be developed for solving the Kurdish Question. Accordingly, recommendations were offered to the government suggesting continued communication with non-governmental organizations, professional associations, experts, and intellectuals, including first of all those

working in the field of human rights; adopting a rights-based attitude and paying as much attention to language as to content before any policies are devised toward a solution.

In the meetings held in Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon, while no objections were voiced against these recommendations, there was debate as to how much the report's language and perspective, the participants and their demands were representative of Kurds. Some participants questioned how representative the recommendations in the Report were of the demands of Kurdish people, and emphasized in that regard that the Report featured a "nationalist and secular language" and was "not reflecting Kurds' language". These participants argued that the Report did not demonstrate the internal variation among Kurds as to politics and ideology, and in their view, the Report is a reproduction of the top-down, secularizing, modernizing discourse of the state, albeit softer in tone. Thus, they said the Report was not democratic and the recommendations offered therein were not adequate.

Some participants said the oppression and injustices affected not only the Kurds, but the entire society, and the recommendations voiced concerned not only the Kurds but the public as a whole, and therefore the problem could be solved by way of general democratization policies.

A quarter of the issues and solution proposals are specifically related to the Kurdish Question, but a great many of them concern all of us, the entire Turkey. We can solve the issues by ensuring the continuity of democracy. The problem in essence stems from the effort to create a 'state society' and from the move for forced modernization.

Participants from socialist and leftist circles advanced serious critiques regarding the fact that the Report had nothing to recommend on the human rights violations committed against Kurds at the time of the 12 September 1980 coup and during the military rule in its aftermath, especially in Diyarbakır Prison:

If this report was indeed distilled from what our Kurdish fellows said, my observation of them is that they've become overly pro-EU. It appears they are no longer hopeful of local dynamics, and they're offering EU-based solutions. There is nothing on the law of the 12 September era which lies at the root of our experience today and the deadlock we're at. Unless that law is brought before justice, unless we face our own past, the solution will remain a dream. I would have wanted to see a historical analysis in the Report, no matter how short. For instance, it is necessary to understand the significance of Erzurum Congress, the Lausanne fairy tale. It is as if the report is passing the problem on to the EU...

## THE METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE SECTION OF THE REPORT

The debates and critiques concerning the Report's "Methodology and Objective" section focused entirely on the participants of the Diyarbakır meeting and the authors of the report.

When Kurds' demands were being compiled, the basis has been the intellectuals, NGOs and other groups, leading personalities and political party members who are considered to be 'Kurds' representatives'. No one bothered to ask anything to the ordinary folk we call 'Kurd' who is the primary addressee, who goes about his life without any titles, who is the sufferer, who is made the subject of many plans and designs. Those are the people whose views need to be heard. That's because people speaking on their behalf might have ideological attitudes, political prejudices, relations of interest and other negative factors. In fact, there's no path to a durable solution with people and groups who consider the absence of a solution as a principle to be defended to ensure their survival.

The question needs to be defined as a grassroots democratization issue or a set of economic-social problems. It invites trouble to attribute the matter to one single region or group. This report contains only the voices of feudal chiefs and socialist Kurds struggling against the state. Although the report is important in that it offers concrete recommendations, the ideas expressed in it do not contain any trace of the public. The civil society and politics in the region in fact speak through a unified voice... There is no dissenting voice among them. I don't think what they are saying represents the view of the people. These fellows have quite naturally become stuck between the state and the organization, and inclined toward the latter.

I think the way the report was put together is very wrong. Is there any chance the Kurdish representatives there could say anything contrary to İmralı<sup>7</sup> and Kandil<sup>8</sup>, walk on a different line? The report gives voice to only one sound, the fellows in Diyarbakır spoke through the same discourse. Had the report been authored by the guy in İmralı, it would not have been any different. Although it is said "we don't want to separate" in the context of political demands, the recommendation concerning the reinforcement of local government is in my opinion an attempt to institutionalize

7 The prison/island where Abdullah Öcalan serves his sentence.

8 Kandil (Mount Qandil), located on the Iranian border with Iraq, has a PKK-held territory where several PKK camps are based.

separation. What our Kurdish citizens want, we want to hear them in different ways, not through slogans uttered through the mouth of the organization. I don't think the demands here represent the opinions of the Kurdish public.

Although it is a good thing that the Report was prepared by people from the region, it does not offer a comprehensive assessment about different groups of Kurds and their problems. The Report contains the basic clichés characterizing the worldview of its authors, that is, signs of a 'general labor and human rights' defense common to people following a social democratic line of thinking. Moreover, the Report is drafted to prevent discrimination, but contains recommendations that seek preferential treatment. Also, certain inclinations stemming from the contributors' being members of the feudal structure have found their place in it. For instance, the critiques offered in relation to education, unemployment, women's rights and children discussed the effects of the armed violence and forced displacements in the region. But there were no remarks at all on the products of the feudal structure, that is, the impact of child marriage, polygamy or having many children on poverty, women's and children's rights.

One might say that there are two important reasons why debate focused on the recommenders rather than the recommendations discussed in the Report as Kurds' demands: First, the demands voiced there were in fact considered fair and they could not be objected to; therefore, instead of targeting the demands themselves, those who voiced them were targeted and accused. Second, civil society and intellectuals in Turkey are unable to follow closely the parties to and the actors relevant to the Kurdish Question, they don't recognize them, and offer wholesale generalizations on the basis of information gleaned from the media. As a result, they condemn even the most mundane demands of Kurds as "PKK's demands". Nevertheless, those who can watch the issues closely will notice, when they look at the list of names at the end of the Report, the presence of a group comprised of individuals with various political and ideological leanings. As a matter of fact, in Kurdish political circles, there are movements and actors offering very harsh critiques of PKK's position and demands, finding them to be inadequate.

Considering the heavy criticism leveled through the participants against the Report in the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings together with the attacks by PKK leaders against the Report on their websites, it becomes easier to understand the nature of the media disinformation which is setting the terms of the debate on this question.

In addition to these debates, critiques were heard in all meetings that the Report did not mention the problems and opinions of Kurds living outside the Eastern and Southeastern regions. These critiques were voiced especially by Kurds living in İzmir and human rights advocates who conducted studies with them, and their basis is that Kurds living in the country's west faced a particular problem which Kurds of the Eastern and Southeastern regions do not know about, which is the issue of everyday discrimination.

The Report needs to be expanded to include the demands of Kurds living in other parts of Turkey. Kurds living in those other parts face issues that are very different from the problems of Kurds of Eastern and Southeastern regions, and they will have different demands, and these are demands that cannot and should not be neglected in solving the Kurdish Question. For instance, the fundamental problem of Kurds of the west is unemployment. When you're hungry, cultural rights and stuff like that do not mean much. The Report does not discuss this issue adequately. Indeed, it is necessary to consider separately what Kurds living outside of Diyarbakır, for instance those living in Istanbul or Ankara think, how they assess the issues. In fact, people attending these meetings are generally intellectual, knowledgeable and experienced. It is important to gain in-depth understanding of what the lay people think. Therefore, the public needs to be involved in these studies.

Rather than having a regional scope, solutions that are contemplated must target the entirety of Turkey, all parts of it, and relate to the political system and mentality as a whole. That is, going beyond a report focusing on a region, the whole political structure needs to be considered, especially when it comes to the Kurdish Question.

## **THE REPORT'S SECTION ON POLITICAL STEPS**

That section of the Report discusses two main topics: "Disarming PKK" and "Dialog with Kurdish political parties and non-governmental organizations". In parallel with that, the same subheadings will be adopted in this study and participants' remarks will be conveyed as such. However, it is necessary to note with respect to this section that the following general evaluations were offered in the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings: If the political will is there, that is, if the government wants it, some changes, improvements can come into being. Following the example of *TRT Şeş*, various institutions starting with the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Health can take a number of steps. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that there are certain obstacles and limitations standing in the way of the parties, DTP and AKP, seeking a solution to the question. Furthermore, neither DTP, nor Rights and Freedoms Party (*Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi, Hak-Par*), nor AKP is seen to have a clear plan toward the solution of the Kurdish Question.

## DISARMING THE PKK

Analyses on the PKK sparked some of the fiercest debates in the meetings. Participants held on to their positions tightly in these debates, in which three main groups seem to have formed. The first group rejects violence categorically but in the meantime seeks to draw attention to the need to understand Kurds and the PKK. The second group prioritizes the need to understand the public and wants Kurds and the PKK to adopt an attitude that considers people's sensitivities. The third one considers the PKK in light of the general policies that have been in effect for years, and criticizes the Report; the participants whose ideas were represented in the Report; and, those who authored the Report.

Participants in the first group differ in their approach and have divergent opinions. Some of them said the phrases "amnesty" and "disarming PKK" were part of a subjective discourse reflecting the perspective of the state and the Turkish public opinion, and faulted the Report for its language.

The issue bearing the highest priority on the path to a solution is the cessation of violence, disarming the PKK. However, the Report's reference to a "regulation that does not involve amnesty" is not very clear. Not only is the request not clear enough, the issue of disarming the PKK and silencing the guns are areas where the Report hits a deadlock. In addition, the Report's use of the phrase "disarming the PKK" is wrong. Instead reference should have been made to "laying down the arms". What needs to be ensured is laying down arms, rather than disarming the PKK. That is, the PKK, the state and the village guards should all drop their weapons.

Recommending "amnesty" to PKK members to solve the problem is both wrong and far from being productive. Because, people who say that they took to the mountains to defend the rights they were robbed of shouldn't be expected to agree to being forgiven. It should also be kept in mind that such a regulation will traumatize the public in general.

The Report recommends that PKK militants, after being forgiven and rehabilitated, should not be employed in security and education sectors. These are discriminatory approaches and they must be removed from the Report. The phrase "there is a group that demands amnesty and disarmament" in the Report is a very offensive one.

The PKK can be disarmed only by solving the question. The Kurdish Question precedes the PKK, and it will be there if the PKK ceased to exist. In addition, Kurds have serious concerns that their demands won't be granted and the problem won't be fixed were they to lay down arms, and they are not quite unjustified in having those concerns.

Some other participants in the same group did not object to the phrase "disarming the PKK", but they pointed to the two-pronged structure within the state as the most formidable obstacle before the efforts in this regard, and emphasized the limits of government's authority and power.

Disarming the PKK won't solve the Kurdish Question, but it will be a positive step. The main parties to the problem are the PKK and the state. However, the state has a two-pronged structure, namely the army and the government.

Some participants who may be considered to form a second group argued against these views on grounds of a realist approach that pays attention to the public's sensitivities:

'Why would we seek forgiveness, we didn't do anything' is an unacceptable attitude. The mere expression of that will suffice to create serious degree of outrage among the public. Also, one needs to think carefully on the issue of reincorporating PKK members into the society. The PKK is described as a terrorist organization in the country. Answers need to be readied to such questions as how the public will react to the reincorporation demand, or, for instance, what families of the fallen soldiers will think about it. Moreover, taking the PKK as the only counterpart along the process won't help fix the problem, on the contrary, it'll bring the solution process to a deadlock.

A critique that needs to be leveled against the Report is the recommendation for a general amnesty. I am not in favor of people serving jail time. But at the present time, without a questioning of Turkey's past, you can't just suggest general amnesty. Releasing the Ergenekon members won't help with the issue, for instance. I am trying to be realistic. Should Öcalan be freed? I don't think it would be a problem, let him be freed, but that won't contribute to a solution. We may chant "Freedom for Apo", we may act on our emotions. But that won't do any good for a solution. That's not the path to a solution.

The remarks that make up the third group mainly fault the Report for having neglected the regional and international character of the Kurdish Question, having emphasized the state's responsibility while making no reference to the crimes and rights violations committed by the PKK and the administration in 'Northern Iraq', and having granted legitimacy to Abdullah Öcalan.



Even the members of parliament who say they were elected as parliamentarians for the region point to ‘İmralı’ for solving the problem, and the Report does not criticize that. On the contrary, it contains statements such as “recognizing Kurdish society’s sensitivity concerning the PKK will help with the establishment of a relationship of trust”, and this demonstrates that the authors of the Report pursue the same objectives.

The Report makes no mention of the impact of the leaders in Northern Iraq on the region. The armed clashes in the region within the scope of the struggle against the PKK involved not only the village guards but also members of Barzani’s and Talabani’s tribes. The Report offered no analysis of the regional issue in those respects.

The region is home to a very high level of human trafficking, weapons and drug trade, and it is rather very awkward that there is not even one single sentence in the Report on this international matter, on the prevention of Kurdish children becoming part of those criminal organizations.

The Report criticizes the state’s policies toward the East and the Southeast (toward the Kurdish Question) and cites some fair reasons, but it is not fair to hold the state as the only party accountable for the losses suffered as a result of terror. Likewise, it was not specified what price was paid for the bloodshed committed by the PKK to gain recognition.

Making no recommendations as to PKK leadership and suggesting that DTP should be considered a party to the issue, the Report is essentially supporting the idea that Abdullah Öcalan needs to be considered as a leader.

#### **DIALOG WITH KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

That section of the report states in sum that DTP is not the only actor in Kurds’ political life and the government is recommended to establish communication with the political parties and organizations that are putting the Kurdish Question on their agenda in some way, and that the pluralization of Kurds’ political life must be ensured.

In the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings, participants debated in this regard the theme of representing Kurds, and in some way offered certain recommendations or accusations in line with their respective political inclinations. Some Kurdish participants in particular reacted harshly against the recommendations concerning pluralization of the Kurdish political movement, and emphasized that these approaches in fact meant to divide the Kurds.

The phrases “dialog with Kurdish political parties” and “pluralization of Kurdish political movement” should not have been used in the Report. Such phrases are intended to create factions among Kurds. In addition, the Report has a problem about whom to address. Without addressing DTP, a solution to this problem cannot be expected.

The recommendation to establish dialog with Kurdish political parties is important, because there is pressure on DTP in the Grand National Assembly. It is a violation of the freedom of thought and expression to stipulate “see the PKK as a terrorist organization, and then we will begin to talk” as a precondition to communication. You can’t force anyone to express their opinions. The Report might emphasize that.

Some other participants questioned DTP’s capacity to represent Kurds, and criticized the Report’s recommendations for the government to address that party while developing policies for a solution:

There is a subheading ‘dialog with Kurdish political parties’, but how representative are those political parties and NGOs of the Kurdish public?

The percentage of votes garnered by DTP shows that DTP, or BDP as they are now called, is not a leading representative of Kurds. Nevertheless, the Report notes “the establishment of a relationship and dialog with DTP administrators is inevitably important for a democratic solution to the Kurdish Question”, and that imposes a precondition and offers a one-sided perspective. Considering DTP to be the representative of the entire region without regard to the votes it got, and drafting a report in a spirit suggesting that Kurds are the protectors of peoples of other races in the region are signs of a biased opinion.

#### **THE REPORT’S SECTION ON CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL REFORMS**

The section mainly discusses why a new Constitution is necessary and additionally points to amendments needed in the current Constitution and articles that need to be dealt with primarily. However, constitutional and legal amendments to be effected toward the solution of the Kurdish Question were offered by the authors in a separate report in light of debates and correspondence with certain legal practitioners in Ankara, Diyarbakır and Istanbul<sup>9</sup>.

9 See Dilek Kurban and Yılmaz Ensaroğlu, *Toward a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Constitutional and Legal Recommendations*. TESEV Publications. Istanbul, 2010.

Therefore these meetings did not discuss constitutional and legal reforms in detail. In any case, analyses by participants who are legal experts in this regard were given consideration in the present study.

## NEW CONSTITUTION

The demand for a new, civilian and democratic Constitution enjoyed substantial support in almost all meetings from most of the participants. This state of affairs is yet another proof that there is a serious social consensus on the need for a new and civilian, democratic Constitution. Following remarks were offered around the demand for a new Constitution:

Firstly, a Constitution must be drafted that is inclusive and representative of all segments of society. A democratic and civilian Constitution is necessary for the solution of both the Kurdish Question and Turkey's many other issues that have assumed a chronic character. The new Constitution must be one which recognizes all differences, secures coexistence and does not impose militarism. In that regard, the Report is generally very positive, especially the recommendations on constitutional reforms will solve not only the Kurdish Question but also the Turkish Question.

The current Constitution contains 60 phrases that are discriminatory, and that promote unilateralism, one nation and one language. This is a critical point in terms of perceiving and comprehending the question. Such discriminatory regulations should have no place in the new Constitution to be drafted.

Some participants had a favorable opinion of Report's constitutional amendment recommendations, but considered them inadequate:

Although the section on constitutional and legal reforms referred to the issue of discrimination, a series of regulations must be made such that there is a separate section in the Constitution on discrimination, criminal legislation defines the sanctions applicable to discrimination, rights are recognized and protected as well grievances are prevented, and these must be secured under the Constitution.

Among the constitutional recommendations are regulations concerning the Military Supreme Court. In fact, the Military Supreme Court must be decommissioned because it creates a dualistic judicial structure. In addition, the Report must mention that the military units and activities need to be rendered available for judicial review, and budget audit must be put on the agenda.

The Report's subheadings must include detailed information under them. The word "Turk" must be removed from the text of the first article of the Constitution. The notion of "being from Turkey" must be brought to the agenda and that notion must be recognized. The homeland should not longer be considered an entity composed of territory and flag, but a value composed of people living in it.

Nevertheless, one participant criticized the recommendations on education and public services in native language in the context of a new Constitution:

The recommendation for a new Constitution reads as follows: "adopting a notion of citizenship that recognizes Turkey's multicultural structure, allows for the provision of public services, education in mother tongue or mother tongue training in languages other than the official one if requested in places where Kurds mainly live, maintaining equal distance to all religions and faiths, subscribing to a genuine notion of secularism". Instead of those sentences it could just openly have said "autonomy must be granted", which would have been more honest. Moreover, adding the word "Kurd" to the phrase "Turkish Nation" in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey has no constitutional ground.

## LEGAL REFORMS

As noted above, recommendations on legal reforms were offered in a separate report, and therefore only a few issues were discussed briefly in these meetings. Some participants, including mainly human rights advocates, emphasized that the Report's section on legal reforms should have contained a regulation on hate crimes. In addition, it was noted that the Report would better have a separate section entitled "Language and Cultural Rights" concerning Kurds' cultural and social rights.

Of Kurds' demands requiring legal regulation, the one that was debated most was concerned with the demand of education in native language. Some participants pointed that Kurdish children did not speak Turkish and were therefore not able express themselves well and had trouble at school, and added that the Constitution must have room for Kurdish identity and language and Kurds' cultural rights. According to some others, however:

There is no problem with offering Kurdish as an elective in schools. But as long as Turkish remains the official language, there can't be a second language.

Everyone has the right to receive education in their native language. Although we react to the denial of the linguistic rights, educational rights and identities of Turks in Greece, we remain silent on similar problems of Kurds in this country.

Turks in Bulgaria have fled to Turkey because there was an attempt to destroy their identities, and they returned after the end of the Jivkov regime, established their own political party and became part of the coalition. And as it was seen, Bulgaria did not divide as a result.

Some participants, however, did not openly object to Kurds learning their native language, but said that education in native language would be an obstacle before integration and equal opportunity in education.

It must be ensured that all citizens learn Turkish. How will Kurds receive quality education if they don't speak Turkish? The war, the conflict must come to an end; you will solve that problem only through education.

### THE REPORT'S SECTION ON ECONOMIC REFORMS

The Report's Section on Economic Reforms contains recommendations grouped under such headings as Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP*) Action Plan, Industry and Trade Policies, Tourism, Border Trade, Agriculture and Animal Husbandry. In the roundtables held in Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon, some of the recommendations in the Report on economic reforms enjoyed support, while others were debated in terms of their feasibility and efficiency.

Some participants did not oppose to the Report's recommendations in principle, but they opposed to them on grounds of market economy facts:

The Report treats the problem's economic dimension in detail and requests government incentives for animal husbandry, agriculture, etc. But it is rather very difficult for that to be feasible today. First of all, the economy is no longer based on industry. Thus, if any investments are to be made, that needs to be in the services and information sectors. We can help people make money if we train them in the professions of the future. Cash assistance by the state is no good to solve the problem. Paying cash to offer incentives is the way to enrich your supporters through the state. If necessary, you can build the plant's wall, put equipment in it, but that makes sense only if the plant operates in the field of information or services sectors.

Some participants, in addition, offered their own recommendations to enhance those in the Report. These include involving the region's parliamentarians and mayors in the solution process for the purpose of enhancing policies on the region's economy by way of democratic processes, and encouraging domestic tourism in the region.

Some participants, however, furnished important objections and critiques concerning the installation of consular offices in Diyarbakır and Erbil representing the Kurdistan Regional Authority, and vice versa:

It doesn't make any sense to recommend installing a consular/representation office in Diyarbakır. It will be more feasible to have those in Ağrı or Van, and wishing them to be in Diyarbakır must be based on some other intentions.

Against this and similar remarks, some participants offered the following critiques of most of the Report's economic reform recommendations:

The Report mentions "special measures that are necessary for revitalizing agriculture and animal husbandry in the region" in relation to the GAP Action Plan. These recommendations are in conflict with EU progress reports. While they recommend increasing urban population, the Report recommends the displaced persons' return to villages. But I agree with the idea of supporting animal husbandry and agriculture throughout Turkey.

The Report's statement "the region has been neglected by the state since the early years of the Republic until the present time" in the section on industry and trade policies is not accurate. Today, you have villagers in Anatolia who have to survive under conditions harsher than those in Hakkâri. If economic investments are meant to refer to factories and the industrialization of agriculture, a manufacturer's not opening a factory in Hakkâri is as normal as his not opening a factory in Kastamonu or Artvin.

It is questionable why the Report makes no mention of feudal chiefs blocking land reform or of the industrialization of agriculture.

In relation to border trade, the Report suggests the following: “In the past, international trade routes passed through the region, and economic life was very vibrant there”. That is a wrong view and conflicts with the other sections of the Report. If the Report is right, that means economic activity in the region was very vibrant before terror began, that is before 1984, in other words, after the foundation of the Republic.

## THE REPORT’S SECTION ON SOCIAL POLICIES

Recommendations under the Social Policies section of the TESEV 2008 Report are grouped under the subheadings “Education”, “Struggle against Poverty”, “Children”, “Women” and “Seasonal Laborers”. Views offered in roundtable discussions for and against the demands in that report are categorized below in parallel with those subheadings.

### EDUCATION

Some participants in the meetings stated that Kurdish children starting school without knowledge of Turkish underwent a major trauma in education as they did not receive education in their native languages, and this finding did not attract any objection. In other words, it was submitted that there is a ‘problem’ resulting from Kurdish children not having equal educational opportunities or there was no objection to views arguing for that. However, there were differences of opinion emerging in the debates concerning the solution of that problem and Kurds’ demands for education in native language.

If “autonomy” is the recommended solution, this should have been debated more honestly; if it is not, then providing education in native language and thereby incorporating Kurdish children into an education system that would be dysfunctional outside of the East and Southeast will amount to aggravating the problem, not solving it. However, it is most natural for Kurds and for groups with other identities to enjoy social life in their own native tongue. But if we’re saying “we’re one”, providing education in a single language is a must.

Additionally, supplementary suggestions were made to build upon the Report’s recommendations:

An issue that ought to have been mentioned in the Report is vocational training. Vocational training is a very important matter; the issue of people with no occupational skills must be taken care of. It is always the Kurds who work as unqualified laborers in the construction and tourism sectors in the west.

### STRUGGLE AGAINST POVERTY

The most serious objection, after those offered against disarming PKK, concerning the Report’s recommendations was directed at those relating to overcoming poverty in the Eastern and Southeastern regions where Kurds mainly live. Participants noted the Report’s social policy recommendations on poverty and seasonal labor and those on development projects, agriculture and animal husbandry must apply to Turkey as a whole, and that any steps to be taken in those regards should be considered in relation to the entire country.

Poverty and children’s issues must be discussed as a whole. In fact, not just Kurdish children’s problems, but all children’s problems and not just Kurds’ poverty and but the entire society’s poverty must be dealt with.

In debates on the matter, the following reasons were offered to say that the social support recommendations of the Report were faulty or insufficient:

I think the social supports recommended in the Report won’t do any good. Instead, incentives that could vitalize the free economy ought to be considered.

In terms of the socio-economic situation, the word “Kurd” in the Report might just be replaced with any other group’s name. The Report’s claims and findings on poverty hold true for the entire society.

### CHILDREN

For some participants in the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings, recommendations on children constituted the Report’s most legitimate and unobjectionable content.

The Report’s requests concerning children are very good and comprehensive. They need to be improved and the issue of children must be dealt with separately within the Kurdish Question. Because, women and children suffer from an additional set of issues around this question. Exclusion is an insurmountable barrier especially for women and children.

Some participants who generally approach the Kurdish Question as a matter of feudalism and backwardness, and additionally hold the PKK rather than the state responsible for the question, followed the same line of thinking when it came to recommendations concerning children. According to these participants, the Report's ignoring feudalism even when it deals with social issues such as those involving young girls being pushed to suicide shows that the Report is rather out of touch with the reality of the Kurdish society:

The Report contains the following views and recommendations: "The poverty that came into being over the course of the forced displacements especially since the early 1990s caused families to keep their children away from school and instead use them as workforce to be able sustain themselves". These views are one-sided. The education issue became aggravated as much because of the feudal structure and PKK's murder of teachers since 1984 as it was due to the state's past deficiencies.

The Report stays out of touch with reality when it has no room for the effects of the feudal structure in the context of "homeless children, children pushed to criminal activity, girls forced to commit suicide and honor killings", which are oft-discussed in the Report.

## WOMEN

As in the case of children, participants were observed to be quite 'sensitive' toward the issues of Kurdish women, and they described women as in need of protection from their own society, especially from Kurdish men and as trapped by feudalism and patriarchal society. This perspective is fairly widespread in Turkish public opinion and in mainstream media with respect to Kurds and the Kurdish Question, and it describes Kurdish women as if they live in a unique context of oppression that is different from the case of Turkish women:

It is not clear how gender equality was paid attention to in the drafting of this Report. For instance, in some places Kurdish men are known to object to Kurdish women's learning Turkish and acquiring literacy on grounds that it will lead to Kurds' assimilation. Therefore, the patriarchal social structure needs to be considered part of the Kurdish Question. The Report should have had room for the voices of Kurdish feminists.

## SEASONAL LABORERS

Described in the Report as a consequence of forced/unavoidable migration triggered by an environment of armed conflict, seasonal Kurdish labor is in the views of most of the participants of the Mersin, Trabzon and İzmir meetings a problem of workforce. In part to a lack of information on the Kurdish Question, participants were not convinced that seasonal laborers were a specific social group unto themselves given the war they left behind, forced displacement and poverty, and that they would need policies geared specifically toward them as distinct from other laborers:

In relation to seasonal laborers, the Report recommends "the residential and accommodation needs of children left behind families working in seasonal jobs need to be met. Arrangements must be made to ensure secure and free transportation of laborers to their workplaces". If this is meant to say that it is employer who needs to take care of all that, then it's worth considering. Otherwise, if that refers to the state satisfying those needs, that wouldn't be fair for labor life.

In addition to the remarks above, the Report received severe criticism for not having room for arts, culture and literature. It was emphasized in that regard that the discourse used by politicians was in the end a power discourse, and such notions as "arts for peace, peace for arts", "peace for labor, and labor for peace" were discussed. It was noted that arts could take place and flourish only in an environment of peace.

## THE REPORT'S SECTION ON FORCED MIGRATION

The section on Forced Migration in the TESEV 2008 Report contained demands and recommendations regarding "Village Guards", "Return to the Village", "Urban Life", "Compensation Law", "Landmines" and "Establishment of Justice". In the roundtables, however, views were offered on Kurdish refugees, which the Report did not discuss separately.

Debates concerning forced Kurdish migration reflect Kurds' and Turks' different perspectives and divergent opinions on the Kurdish Question. While participants in the Mersin, İzmir and Trabzon meetings pictured forced migration arising from evacuated villages as a violation of rights and an extension of the state's historical policies toward Kurds, some of the non-Kurdish participants described compensation by the state to forced migrants under

Compensation Law No. 5233 as an instance of ‘discrimination’ against non-Kurds. The latter view, as a matter of fact, is illustrative of how lack of information or misinformation leads to prejudices or wrong judgments among the public. Following statements by a participant serve as a typical example:

In the case of compensating for losses suffered by forced migrants, it is discriminatory and unacceptable to grant facilities different from those accorded to villagers living in other parts of the country. For example, people in the Black Sea region have receivables dating back to 2004, and those in the Southeast have none due to them even from the past year.

However, the following remarks by a participant speaking on behalf of a non-governmental organization active in the area of migration for a long time offer an important framework regarding the consequences of forced migration:

Had there been no Kurdish Question, this migration would not have arisen, nor would these social and political problems have emerged in the cities. That is, migration is a sub-section of the Kurdish Question. This issue in fact has roots in the Resettlement Law of 1934, and it acquired a systematic character thanks to the State of Emergency Law. The figure of one million mentioned in the Report is not accurate, that covers only those migrating from rural areas. Those forced to migrate from province and district centers are not included in it. The number of people forced to migrate is above three million. In addition, during times of forced migration, the UN’s Guiding Principles were not implemented. Over the process, Kurds suffered deep traumas resulting from the violence and human rights violations as well as the poverty and exclusion experienced in the places they arrived.

## **KURDISH REFUGEES**

Although it was not discussed in the 2008 Report, the issue of Kurdish refugees was raised in regional meetings by NGOs specializing in refugee law, refugees and asylum-seekers with respect to people who had to leave Turkey starting in the 1980s and relocate to Europe and other places. The Kurdish diaspora is left totally out of the discussion concerning the incorporation of PKK members upon disarmament as part of the government’s “Kurdish Initiative”, and it was raised as an issue that should definitely be considered in the event of a political solution attempt.

The Report does not discuss Kurdish refugees who left Turkey. However, Turkey is one of the most serious refugee-producing countries, the main reason being the Kurdish Question. As a matter of fact, there is nothing attractive about living abroad for the refugees. For this group, a legal arrangement must be made that recognizes the right to ‘safe return’ and guarantees that they won’t be penalized and prosecuted upon return and that all of their constitutional rights will be accorded. A recommendation similar to the one referring to “a regulation that does not include amnesty” for PKK members in the Report must be also made for Kurdish refugees. This is because the Kurdish diaspora is a large group, and therefore solution recommendations must include them. In fact, the return of refugees is not just a matter of political conditions. There are people who sought refuge for reasons that appear to be economic at first sight, such as the evacuation of villages, suffering discrimination, being forced to migrate, failing to sustain a livelihood in the city upon migration and to find a job. The Report’s holistic approach should apply to refugees as well.

## **LANDMINES AND FORESTS**

The participants in the roundtable meetings were largely unaware of the issues raised under the Report heading, “Landmine Fields and Forests”. Consequently, not many participants were able to address this particular issue during the meetings. The very few comments made may be summarized as follows:

Careful attention must be paid to think how mined fields, once they are cleared of mines, will be disposed of, and solutions such as a land reform must be devised to ensure egalitarian ownership of land by the public. For instance, it may be provided that these fields are given to the forced migrants who return.

When there is a forest fire in Antalya, environmentalists react, but when forests are in, or more appropriately put to, flames in the Southeast, everybody’s silent.

## **THE REPORT’S SECTION ON REINFORCING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

Although the topic of local governments generated heated discussion in the meetings from time to time, thought-provoking views were offered on the topic. However, the idea to reinforce local governments debated frequently in recent times within the framework of the ‘democratic autonomy’ demand of the Kurdish political movement met its objectors on the ground that it would cause the country to divide in the future or encourage secession.

The section on local governments must incorporate the notion of multilingual service. It is very important to create provincial assemblies and gather groups with divergent views such as the DTP, CHP and MHP to discuss problems. If those assemblies are set up, the power and influence of the central state could be diminished.

The Local Government Reform was cut short in 2005. Regulations are necessary in the area. However, leaving education entirely to local governments will invite other problems in Turkey. That should be limited to the opening of privately-owned schools.

It is very wrong and dangerous to reinforce local governments, because the entities that brought the local administrators in the region to those posts are known. Instead of carrying out basic municipal duties such as infrastructural works or cleaning up the garbage, they engage in politics. Regional government and autonomy demands will have divisive consequences. First, the people of the region need to be educated and their infrastructural issues must be taken care of.

## ISSUES NOT DISCUSSED IN THE REPORT

### RELIGION

Although not discussed in the 2008 Report, religion as a general issue, and Islam and humanitarian aid efforts in the region as a particular issue, were discussed in detail in the roundtables. The main points of the discussion were that ‘the Report made no mention of religion, although it is the most important link connecting Kurds and Turks’, and that the activities of Islamic associations and foundations operating in the region were troubling.

Participants who were critical that the analysis on solution policies reserved no place for religion in discussions on the Kurdish Question and emphasized that religion was the strongest link between Turks and Kurds mainly offered the following opinions and critical remarks:

It is a problem that the Report makes no mention of religion in general, and Islam in particular. Failing to discuss where Islam is in relation to this question is a deficiency in terms of a comprehensive treatment of the matter. One can exchange ideas on many issues with Kurds and Alevis under the roof of Islam, many subjects can be rendered common. Because, Islam is an important connecting force, it is very fortunate that Turks and Kurds are both Muslims. One needs to see that. Socialists will end up nowhere by ignoring religion. Mere democratization or putting money in people’s pockets are not enough, people simultaneously, or even primarily, want to be treated with respect.

There is an effort in the Report to fix the wrongs done on the basis of race by working through the same concept. Such an approach, however, is very misguided. If the democratization problem is taken as the umbrella, the rest will follow more easily. The only recommendation in the Report on religion is “sermons in Kurdish”. But it will be useful to proceed through religion which is the most comprehensive and unifying element in Turkey. The discourse configured around Kurds only bolsters reactions everywhere. When discussing the Kurdish Question, Islam as a factor is being neglected. The activities of Islamic associations in the region mean to make up for the neglected and missing dimension. These associations have no intention of creating an alternative Kurdish movement. The region historically has been an area where Islam prevailed, in any case.

However, some participants raised their concerns regarding Islamic foundations and associations in the region:

The operations of Islamic foundations and associations lack good faith. It is impossible to see the aid campaigns in Tunceli as a sign of good faith. Having 120 different Islamic associations is a problem in itself.

Participants from Islamically sensitive groups, however, were critical of the concerns raised against the aid distributed to the poor by religious organizations in the region:

The good faith behind the aid provided in the region should not be questioned, and no evil intention should be sought there. It is seen that everyone has a problem of approaching the problem in a positive manner. First, we need to get rid of that.

In discussions on what use could be made of religion in solving the Kurdish Question, Kurdish participants in particular offered the following critiques of Islamic groups:

Most Kurds spent some time in religious schools and mosques, but they are also aware of how Islam is exploited by governments in general and by politicians in the region in particular.

The religion issue should not be missing from the picture when the Kurdish Question and possible solutions are being discussed, but religious circles adopt a quite problematic attitude to the Kurdish Question. For example, Said-i Nursi is in fact Said-i Kürdi. The word “Kurd” in his texts has been removed and replaced with “people of the east”. The



schools launched by the Fethullah Gülen movement in the east only aim a brain-drain and seek to move Kurdish children away from the region and suppress Kurdish children's ethnic identity. Whenever an important religious leader emerges in the region (such as Bediüzzaman Saidi Nursi), Islamic groups set out to prove that person is in fact not a Kurd. It is not possible to understand why these people have a hard time admitting that those individuals are Kurds.

In addition to the views above, it was also argued that the absence of religion in studies such as the 2008 report was the result of a PKK decision and that the absence of a solution recommendation relating to religion showed the effect of PKK's anti-religious efforts.

## THE MEDIA

Some participants were critical of the fact that the Report did not have a separate subheading covering the media, and emphasized that the language and discourse used by the media with respect to Kurds and the Kurdish Question played an important role on the current status of the matter. They pointed in that regard to the importance of bringing the public to a more sensitive position in the struggle against the hate discourse in visual and print media.

## WHICH KURDISH DEMANDS ARE CONSIDERED LEGITIMATE AND TO WHAT DEGREE? (ANALYSIS OF DEMANDS)

The sessions in which the demands mentioned in the 2008 Report were discussed have very clearly revealed participants' troubled positions arising from a lack of accurate and sufficient information. Participants with very different political backgrounds sometimes swayed, as it were, between their conscience, notions of justice, feelings and ideas of equity on the one hand, and their political prejudices, on the other, and they had a hard time finding the words to express themselves. In fact, the remarks below capture that psychology quite well. But it is necessary to be aware that while this might appear to be a picture of contradictions, it is indeed a product of social conscience and common sense. As one participant noted very fittingly, even the existence of extended discussions in meetings on the political recommendations in the Report and the absence of any major emotional reactions are signs of the democratic maturity that is present in the society. It is of course necessary to keep in mind that a solution will be the result of these democratic exchanges.

In response to questions about the admissibility/inadmissibility of Kurds' demands, participants offered the following remarks:

The demands that are most vital for a solution are those which are most difficult to realize and put into practice. Accordingly, in solving the question the most important issue with the highest priority is disarming the PKK and the realization of constitutional and legal reforms as soon as possible. However, because this entails the state modifying its mindset and approach and perception toward the citizens, it is a very complicated and hard-to-grant demand. Economic and social reforms, however, are demands that are easier to implement. Similarly, cleaning up mine fields and making them available for employment can be considered among the more feasible demands. Parliamentary politics is also considered a moderate demand. But these are reforms that are at the bottom of the list for solving the problem. Moreover, even these demands might raise fear on the part of the governments of being labeled as separatist, as a result of which governments might have second thoughts about putting them into practice.

In searching for a solution, the discrimination that is getting more widespread in society should not be neglected. Without a process of social dialog, a solution crafted in top-down manner won't make much sense. Instead of advancing hard-to-swallow reactions and demands, moderate requests must be furnished firstly, and demands on which collaboration is possible need to be voiced.

I have been discussing this report for the past ten days with my fellow attorneys who have various political leanings. In the case of individual rights, there is generally a warm approach toward democratization demands. But there is opposition against demands on affirmative action, reinforcement of local governments and making Kurdish the second official language, on the grounds that they constitute requests for division in practice. In addition, transferring the taxes collected in the west to the east and spending them there is not welcome.

It is impossible to embrace this report, as it recommends stretching amnesty to cover İmralı. It probably contains effective recommendations for a solution. But when you look especially at the section on political recommendations, it is seen that the report was drafted as part of the process in which the society would be convinced prior to political interventions by imperialist powers aiming to divide the country.

Recommendations on disarming the PKK and granting amnesty regarding official records can be given credit only with respect to individuals who were cheated or who sought for a solution in the wrong places.



It is necessary to support the offering of Kurdish as an elective. Findings and demands concerning women lagging behind in terms of education and employment in the region are very important.

With the exception of the economic recommendations, all of the Report's recommendations will clash with the mainstream securitized worldview and receive criticism. Similarly, the political and legal recommendations in the Report won't be able to avoid the charge of advocating 'separatism'.



# SECTION THREE



## Regional Assessments

In this section, the urban and regional dimension, that is, the local manifestations of the Kurdish Question will be dealt with as they were discussed in the third sessions of the meetings. To that end, points taken up include, through the persons of the participants, the general public's perceptions and ideas about Kurds in their vicinities, disturbances believed to be caused by them, and the problems with them; and by the same token, the problems faced by Kurds, their relations with other people, mutual prejudices and similar matters.

To accurately understand the local manifestations of the Kurdish Question in different parts of the country, sessions on this issue were not organized around specific themes/subheadings. In other words, the idea was that it would be more productive to have a free exchange of ideas without any guidance in order to accurately detect participants' priorities and sensitivities. Therefore, the discussions will be classified under certain headings emerging from the themes emphasized most frequently by the participants.

### “THE QUESTION IS UNKNOWN”

That the Kurdish Question is still not sufficiently and accurately known throughout the country has not been a matter of contention, instead, it was an issue frequently pointed to. There was substantial acknowledgment that sound analyses could not be offered because of a lack of accurate information on the question and as a result recommendations that could make real contribution to the solution of the question could not be developed. Some Kurdish participants in particular complained that people perceived the issue as a problem of terror as it is narrated to them by the state and therefore anything they told was listened to with prejudice and they were constantly accused of being PKK supporters. In response to these complaints, some participants stated that the question must be explained to the west in clear terms and that especially opinion leaders had important duties in that regard. Those participants have also agreed that people living in the west did not have a comprehensive understanding of the problem. Therefore, the question needs to be clarified well to those people and a shared tone should be devised in doing so.

In this regard, the following remarks by a participant require serious consideration:

Here only the martyrs are known. Kurds are ignored. In fact, Kurds here are mostly assimilated or they are mostly out of sight. Here Kurd means terrorist, and solving the Kurdish Question means finishing terror. Therefore, the problem needs to be explained well here.

Another participant related the same fact as follows in relation to another region:

The people of the Black Sea region don't know the problem there. Their first encounter with it is when their sons are sent off to serve their military terms are killed by the terrorists. People in the region need to do more research and share their findings with the society as a whole, and they need to explain the issue in a better way.

In addition, there was frequent emphasis on the need to shed special light on provinces such as İzmir or Mersin which received large numbers of Kurdish migrants. Solving the issues of people living in these provinces where challenges are much deeper and much more complicated is a priority, it was argued, in order to take care of the Kurdish Question or similar matters. It was emphasized that special dialog projects needed to be implemented between these people who live together but feel more estranged from one another as time goes by.

### LANGUAGE AND TONE

Although it was not a particular agenda item, the issue of language and tone attracted much attention in almost all meetings. The references to language and tone were sometimes made to respond to some of the remarks uttered by some participants, but more often these remarks were addressed to certain attitudes and expressions by the media, political leaders and especially actors who stand out as parties to the question. Accordingly, participants

sometimes warned or rebuked each other, and sometimes directed serious criticism at those actors that were deemed parties to the Kurdish question. Some of these remarks are summed up as follows:

You can't mention the importance of tone and then use phrases such as 'freedom fighters'. With that language and discourse, all you can do is fan the flames of conflict on İzmir streets which just received two martyrs for instance.

## RENDERING THE QUESTION A SOCIAL ISSUE

For many years, the Kurdish Question has been considered a problem between the state and the Kurds, and even a part of Kurds. The society began facing the issue through deceased soldiers arriving in their villages and provinces, and as a natural result, perceived the problem as a matter of terror and security. But this state of affairs did not have a major impact on the relations between Kurds and other people in Turkey. In other words, the issue did not gain a social base or acquire a social character. After all the years, and thanks to advances in communication technologies and changing conditions, the public has begun learning more about and debating the question.

Especially due to forced migration the issue became publicly visible across the entire country. Encountering Kurds who migrated to other parts of the country accelerated the process through which the problem gained a social dimension. The encounter to which both sides came reluctantly, and in fact through imposition, led after a while to the growth of mutually negative feelings and the deepening of hatred. Especially in places like Adana, Mersin and İzmir, such negative feelings are gradually being replaced by hatred and hostility. It becomes immediately obvious that participants living in such provinces have very serious concerns. The following remarks need to be pondered upon as an example showing those concerns and fears in a remarkable fashion:

Because there is a rupture of emotions and there are mutual prejudices between the locals and the Kurds in Mersin, coexistence is gradually becoming a more challenging task and people's hostility toward each other is on the rise. In Mersin, you have 400 Kurds who lost their first-degree relatives in the clashes, and above 200 families who lost their children who were soldiers. In such a climate, it is getting more and more difficult for the two peoples to live side by side. In fact, if a Turk-Kurd fight were to erupt in Turkey, it will probably start in Mersin. Actually, there was a confrontation between Kurds and Arabs in Mersin stemming from a brawl among the kids, and 30 Kurds were evacuated on security grounds.

The goings-on in these places have to do with socio-economic transformation as well. Particularly in the last one-and-a-half years, economic crisis has continued to negatively affect the urban poor, and Kurds are perceived to be the reason for that. Kurds form the lowest rung, and they thus accept the lowest wages and work at jobs paying those wages. Urban poor who don't bother to work those jobs because they are more educated may want to have them in a crisis environment, but then begin to see Kurds as their competition. As a result, Kurdish workers and street porters are being attacked.

There were a few lynchings in the Aegean, but despite all the provocation, there was no Turk-Kurd clash. One should not confuse an inclination for a fact. For instance, there isn't and there won't be an issue of people taking up arms and clashing in İzmir. People in İzmir do not express their reactions by taking to streets, they instead put a flag on the window, or would yell from the window at most. Therefore, you need to look at the walls in İzmir. Generally speaking, pieces of graffiti are promptly covered with paint in İzmir. But in recent times one piece is remaining: the graffiti by the Turkist, Socialist, Ethnicist Association (*Türkçü Toplumcu Buduncu Derneği*) which reads "May the World Become Turkish". It's written on the walls of military barracks and concrete columns underneath highways, and only that graffiti has remained untouched for the past five years.

There is in fact no issue of Turk-Kurd clash among the people, but that is being instigated all the time. The events in many places such as Altınova, Seferihisar, Kemalpaşa are signs of that instigation. For example, a family from Diyarbakır with Arab roots living in Seferihisar was listening to a jubilant Kurdish song, and then this petty military officer insults them, a brawl erupts and three to four thousand people threaten a family of three. And then the district governor announces "they have the terrorists under control". Similarly, two young boys in Torbalı/Pancarlı fought over a girl, but since one of the boys was a Turk and the other a Kurd, flags were hoisted. A Kurd won the bid opened at the time of cherry harvesting in Kemalpaşa, and some 300-400 nationalists threatened the man and attempted to lynch him. It is indeed correct that there is no visible Turk-Kurd clash in the Aegean region, but the most important reason for that is the spatial disintegration, the ghettoization. That is, encounters do not have a continuous nature. The metropolises are very isolated places. Problems ensue when people become neighbors. Normally you don't have problems between Turks and Kurds. People took women as wives from one another's group; we had a President who was Kurdish.

## MUTUAL PREJUDICES AND PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION

Roundtable meetings were held with participants with different leanings and sets of experiences, and as a result very productive discussions were conducted and there was a chance to gather instructive information on the general assessments of people living in the Mediterranean, Aegean and Black Sea regions, and their view of developments. Moreover, participants were able to provide self-critiques easily. This facilitated the identification of mutual prejudices that existed among the public. Following statements comfortably illustrate the existing prejudices that are causes for serious concern:

Participants who attended these meetings cannot offer any leads into the views of the residents of these provinces and regions. That's because the public at large does not have the same thoughts as these participants. Especially in smaller provinces and districts, the approach to the question and the perception relating to Kurds are far more negative, and there are attempts that amount to lynching from time to time. A little spark is all that is needed for a clash in some places. In coffee house talks, one can see the terrifying ideas people have. As a result, Kurds in several places, including Söke first of all, feel the urge to hide their identities as Kurds. It is necessary to know that this degree of hostility towards Kurds was unheard of thus far. People who migrated from Turkey to Germany are now offering Kurds the same unfavorable treatment they witnessed in Germany then. About the migrant Turks, Germans thought "they came here and stole our jobs", now in some parts of Turkey the same is being said of Kurds. For instance, there is an association in İzmir by the name Turkist, Socialist, Ethnicist Association, and they went so far as to demand the sterilization of Kurds by the state, arguing that the Kurdish population upsurge must be curbed. During the mass flag meetings, members of that association graffitied walls with the slogan "DTO" (*Dünya Türk Olsun* – May the World Become Turkish). After lawsuits were filed against them, searches were conducted in their premises and unlicensed weapons and tampered documents were found, and their association was shut down as a result. The lawsuits are still pending.

While the public considers people who refer to rights violations as Kurds and DTP affiliates, for the state, they are always members of an organization. For instance, it is thought that anyone from Batman is a supporter of the PKK or Hezbollah.

In the west, there is this perception of Kurds as a 'burden'. Looking at the small amounts of money given by the state to Kurds, they think "we're in need, too, why the support to them?", or they see themselves as 'foolish' citizens paying for the electricity stolen by Kurds.

Seasonal laborers are not allowed in Yozgat or the Black Sea region, and they are subjected to ID checks.

For instance, middle and lower class families living the Aegean region don't want Kurdish neighbors or their children to play with Kurdish children. But those who don't want their children to have Kurdish kids as playmates offer a reason. For instance, when the kids fight among themselves, a group of 25 people from the Kurdish child's family comes to your door. You don't have those extended families in the west, and therefore people see their life threatened.

It is easy to offer recommendations from the region to the government. What is difficult is to be able to develop recommendations for the government from Turkey as a whole. Not only the Turks but also Kurds have serious problems of perception. For instance, I am from İzmir, and I come from a leftist group, and up until now we and our Kurdish friends were together. There's something unchanging about the Kurds I know, they're overemotional and oversensitive. Kurdish friends who believe in a solution need rehabilitation in that regard.

In addition, however, Kurds living in Turkey's west are concerned that Turks will never be able to understand them. This emotional rupture between Kurds and the rest of the society is illustrated in remarkable fashion by a young Kurdish participant:

To prevent tension, it is always the Kurds who are expected to compromise. But that's no longer possible for me. I don't want to remain defensive or be sensitive toward the other side's priorities. That's too heavy of a burden for me now.

Considering those feelings fair enough, one participant noted that it was unfair for the society to expect Kurds to be conciliatory:

How come could we see ourselves in a position in which we're granting rights to others? Who are we to give Kurds their rights? Of course, our Kurdish brothers need to adopt confidence-inspiring attitude. But nationalists, secular nationalist leftists and some conservative Muslims react in the same way, in other words, people who are otherwise so different in their opinions, can come to get together when it comes to this particular issue, which is startling.

Other examples can be given which reveal mutual prejudices, however, even those offered above suffice to demonstrate that there is a serious problem of image and perception around the Kurdish Question, Kurds' problems or demands. As a matter of fact, the SETA&Pollmark study conducted in August 2009 and entitled *The Perception of the Kurdish Question in Turkey* found that 59% of Kurds responded that Kurds do not want to establish a separate state, while 71.3% of Turks believe Kurds do want to establish a separate state.<sup>10</sup>

The remarks which reveal the concerns and mutual prejudices expressed during roundtable meetings also show that much of the information on the question and Kurds is based on the media and that there is in fact a serious issue of authentic and accurate information. Therefore, in order to outgrow these prejudices and reach an accurate understanding of the problem, it is critically important to conduct direct observations and establish communication mutually and to end disinformation and manipulation. Also, one needs to see that a noteworthy level of common sense is still surviving among the people. For instance, the visit paid by the President of Trabzonspor soccer club to Diyarbakır Mayor was reported in very positive light in the local media of both provinces, and people in both places had very warm feelings toward the visit.

In this regard, although participants grant that a serious level of discrimination has developed against Kurds in the Aegean region, they generally think that no social conflict will ensue unless there is incitement by certain circles. It is emphasized in the meantime that approaching the matter in a spirit of empathy is a must, and it is necessary to ensure that non-Kurds stand and react against the pressures on Kurds or the practices that disturb them, before the Kurds themselves do so. Participants mentioned that one million Kurds live in the Aegean region, and some of them own two-story houses and shops but they are nevertheless called separatists, and that the society needs to be convinced that a separatist people would not bother to build those houses and prefer to live there. Participants from the province of Muğla, speaking in relation to this aspect of the question, made the following statements which are worthy of consideration:

We objected to the inscription of Mustafa Muğlalı's name on a most important business complex in the province of Muğla, and we initiated a public debate by way of writings and TV programs to have that name removed, and then we filed an application with the municipality. We need to introduce ourselves to a culture of empathy. The reason we objected to the name of Mustafa Muğlalı was that we empathized. Unless people living in the west do that, there is always the likelihood of serious problems emerging.

The following remarks by a participant with Islamic sensitivities are noteworthy not only because of the sincerity they carry but also because they reveal the reach of the prejudices and show where the solution lies:

A perception of Kurds has emerged in the subconscious. Unless that subconscious is cured, it will be hard to solve this problem. To prevent a clash between the peoples, ideas must be developed on how this subconscious might be altered. I'm a teacher. According to what a fellow teacher told me the other day, a shuttle driver told him that he removed a man and woman from his shuttle on grounds that they were speaking in Kurdish. Another fellow teacher thinks all Kurds are terrorists and they all need to be destroyed. In fact, the society as a whole adopts these approaches. There's that perception in the subconscious. I see that in my own mother and sibling. When talking about Kurds, it's become commonplace to use the words "us" and "them". Are we not people of the same lands? Unless we realize that the guy who takes to the mountains belongs in the same family as the one who is serving his military term, we won't be able to solve this problem.

## **DISCRIMINATION, PRESSURE AND ASSAULTS AGAINST KURDS**

In roundtables, opinions and claims were advanced that Kurds who migrated from the Eastern and Southeastern regions to other places were subjected to various forms of discrimination only because of who they were, and even suffered grave pressures and assaults. Views on this issue, expressed mainly by mostly non-Kurd participants who worked in the area of human rights, demonstrate that not only individuals but also public institutions and authorities discriminate against Kurds and that the discrimination took place in all domains of life, employment, education, housing and access to public services. The claims voiced and the examples given require the government to intervene as soon as possible and take legal precautions to penalize the discriminators while redressing the grievances of those who suffered discrimination and preventing similar incidents in the future.

<sup>10</sup> SETA&Pollmark, *Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Algısı (The Perception of Kurdish Question in Turkey)*, SETA Publications, Ankara, 2009, pp.109-111. The full text of the study can be accessed at <http://www.setav.org/Ups/dosya/8523.pdf>

In certain places, there is hatred and hostility toward Kurdish university students. This is also an attitude one sees in branches of the police from time to time. For example, Kurdish students were assaulted at Afyon Kocatepe University in previous years. Or, a female university student in Muğla was forced to get out of a shuttle after slurs were thrown at her because she was Kurdish. Some privately-owned student dorms in Buca advertise by saying “We don’t admit Kurdish students”

Discrimination and hate against Kurds are channeled through the very organizations tasked to prevent those, which of course raises concerns and elevates social clashes. Following statements illustrate the sources of the Turk-Kurd tension claimed to be on the rise in the Aegean region, especially in the province of İzmir:

In some places, there is a tendency to avoid the sale of real property to Kurds. Selling real property to Kurds is even considered an act of treason. For instance, in the Çandarlı district of İzmir, neither land nor houses are sold to Kurds. The municipality and gendarmerie directly try to prevent Kurdish market-sellers from selling their stuff. The gendarmerie performs ID checks at the entrance and exit of the district of Çandarlı. Similarly, undercover cops spent several days hanging around a cafeteria owned by a Kurdish citizen in İzmir’s Kemeraltı neighborhood and telling the people around that the cafeteria owner was a PKK supporter and they should avoid doing business with him. By the same token, drugs are being handed out to Kurdish children in the Kadifekale neighborhood of İzmir, and the police almost turn a blind eye to Kurdish children becoming part of drug and theft mobs, thinking that such participation will keep them from politics.

Again in İzmir, when Kurds want to stroll through streets in their traditional garb, they suffer social pressure. Upon seeing Mardin or Tunceli as birth places in people’s ID cards, police officers are discriminating. The discrimination is now acquiring a public character and spreading to the people. Arabs are being confused for Kurds and they suffer discrimination. Therefore, several people have their birth records transferred to western provinces. Similarly, refugees speaking Arabic or Persian are confused for Kurds, and are the subject of serious harassment and pressure on the street. It is reported that the idea of “This is Turkey, and you speak Turkish here, what do you mean Kurdish?” is gaining ground among high school students.

There is a discourse of discrimination and hate infused into primary school curriculum and openly put into practice. In İzmir, primary school students walked and chanted slogans of “Death to the PKK” at the guidance of their teachers. There are even teachers known to have taken their students to neighborhoods where many Kurds live and made them shout slogans. Similarly, there is discrimination going on through the practice of flag-hoisting, and there is an attempt to create pressure over the entire society with that. Such practices deepen the disintegration of society.

In many regions that received a high number of Kurdish migrants, there is a real potential for a Kurd-Turk clash. For instance, during those popular ceremonies held to send off recruits to their compulsory military service, people wave huge flags, play drums and horns. And the crowd is acting as if they would just lynch a Kurd if they were to come across one at that time. Discrimination against Kurds has reached a very serious level in some places. The discrimination reached its highest after launch of the initiative and the returns from mountains. With course of events running like this, this problem won’t be fixed through legal reform, social policies, economic improvement, education in native language etc. This sharp division that exists between the privileged Turks and Kurds cannot be effaced with legal changes only.

A non-Kurd participant who has been active in the field of human rights and democratization for several years offered the following interesting and thought-provoking observations:

Kurds living in cities are faced with serious assimilation. Drugs, mob formation and prostitution are quite widespread among Kurds, and a blind eye is being turned to all that, no precautions are being taken. Kurds, especially those aggrieved by forced migration, have no other options. Of course, there is the influence of popular culture. The city has a pub or discotheque. Both the society and the state are fuelling Kurds’ drift into that process. Because there is no notion of multilingual service, there’s ghettoization among Kurds, and they are being deprived of public services. Kurds who have migrated face far more serious challenges than those in the region.







# SECTION FOUR



# Remarks and Recommendations Toward a Solution

In the concluding sessions of the meetings, participants' remarks and suggestions concerning the solution of the problem were discussed. These suggestions will be taken up in this section under the topics to which they relate.

## THE DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF THE QUESTION

Various opinions were voiced with respect to the definition and origin of the question, but the approach that stood out was that it will be much easier to discuss and develop recommendations for a solution if the question was understood as a matter of human rights and democratization. Similarly, it was noted frequently that the PKK was not only source of the problem, on the contrary, it was the Kurdish Question that led to the birth of the PKK, and that absent a democratic solution to the Kurdish Question, similar entities would inevitably emerge even if the PKK were disarmed. It was emphasized accordingly that the historical process needs to be considered and the reasons for PKK's growth should be analyzed carefully in order to solve the Kurdish Question.

## PARTIES TO THE QUESTION, THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE KURDS (PKK AND DTP)

Debate and division was most intense around who the parties to the question were and who represented Kurds. Therefore, remarks and suggestions toward the solution of this particular aspect of the question involved diametrically opposed views. Statements made in this regard can be summed as follows:

Some participants expressed the view that PKK should be addressed as a representative of Kurds, in addition to DTP:

The call for a solution to the question should not be unilateral, and the actual parties to the matter, PKK and DTP, should not be ignored. Accordingly, the government's avoidance of contact with DTP is a mistake to be reversed. The dialog the government will establish with Kurdish political parties and non-governmental organizations will contribute to a democratic and peaceful solution of the question. The issue needs to be resolved together with the people there and in view of internal dynamics, and not in a unilateral and imposing manner.

Recent pressure and detentions targeting DTP administration creates confusion as to "whether they aim to bring the armed men in the mountains to the ground for involvement in politics, or to bring the politicians on the ground to the mountains"

According to some others, however, the idea of negotiating with the PKK is a 'red line' that should not be crossed, and Kurds' requests and insistence on addressing the PKK and Öcalan serve a divisive function and block the solution.

There shouldn't be any negotiation with the PKK. You can't win any rights with guns. PKK should lay down arms, and face the people.

The main obstacle before the solution is our red lines. For instance, considering Öcalan a freedom fighter is a main source of division. Somebody should convince me of that. The PKK is a fundamentally divisive factor here. The basic element of the solution is removing terror from that context. And Kurds should be sensitive about that.

PKK members who have not committed any crime should be forgiven. Those who have committed crimes, whether in the form of lending ideological support or carrying out the organization's business, should all be penalized, starting with the guy who is serving his time in İmralı.

The party we will talk to about the Kurdish Question, about what Kurds want is very important. The politics and civil society in the region in under complete control of the PKK. Are the views expressed in the Diyarbakır meeting really the opinions of those who voiced them? So, it's more appropriate to deal with the question after terror is taken care of.

Kurdish intellectuals somehow always become submissive to the region's tribal structure, and they have no problem thinking in a tribal mentality. Thus, Kurdish parliamentarians who are AKP members should be speaking up.

## **SOCIETY'S AND MEDIA'S RESPONSIBILITY**

While there are differences as to the origin of the question, it can be said that there is a general consensus that the solution cannot simply be expected from the state, and that the society had major duties and responsibilities. Views on this issue, in other words expectations from the public and the media, can be summarized as follows:

We can't burden only the state with finding a solution to the question. A solution will come if we understand each other. People in the west don't know what's really going on in the east, or they don't want to believe, and they think they're being told lies. However, all that is going on is real. So, instead of only waiting for the state to solve the problem, the civil society should try to play a role that will facilitate the solution. Because, the question does not manifest itself at the level of the state only; at the social level, too, people in the west and the east are alienated from each other. In fact, people in the west are completely uninformed on life in the east and do not believe what is happening. The civil society has important duties so that people in the east and the west can listen to and understand each other. As a matter of fact, we are all part of this question as a society. That's because what is being done in the East and the Southeast are being done in the name of the entire society, in all our names. Therefore, we can't remain indifferent, insensitive toward the things being done in the name of solving the question.

Although the discussion is developing around the Kurdish Question, we can't ignore the problems of people from other backgrounds, we can't be democrats just for our own interests. We will be Kurds until Kurds are equal to Turks, we will be women until women are equal to men, we will be Alevis until Alevis are equal to Sunnis.

For a solution to be reached, social consensus needs to be widened, and social consensus is not simply an agreement among the four political parties in the Grand National Assembly. In fact, if the widest possible social consensus is not sought during periods of restoration, the disadvantaged groups won't have the chance to have their voices heard later on. Since 1923, the Republic did not have room for Kurds, Islamists or communists. Therefore, the Constitution that is representing that notion must be replaced. We need to take our lessons from the past, but we shouldn't be stuck in the past. What we really need is a new social contract. We must struggle against all types of discrimination. That's because equality will set us free.

In order to overcome the intensifying feelings of hatred among the people, dialog needs to be improved first. Thus, the hate discourse in the media should be transformed, which in turn might contribute to the public's transformation.

Televisions still broadcast movies that denigrate Kurds, there are publications and stories to the tune of "Kurds have demonic and devilish origins". These humiliating practices without scientific aim should be prevented.

The problem is in fact not the Kurds, it is us, those who see themselves as carriers of an overarching identity. We shouldn't attempt to designate the parties to the question. But we both want to define the problem on our own, and establish who are parties to it and who should be addressed. The parties that need to be addressed might include İmralı, Kandil, European Parliament or similar organizations which we call as the foreign powers. Our troubles in that regard stem from our lack of self-confidence. In addition, some oppose to the initiative just because it is the AKP that launched it. That the initiative has been launched now is a consequence of the fact that a position can no longer be postponed. It is fortunate that AKP is leading the way. Had the initiative been launched ten years ago, a lot of progress would have been made.

All responsible individuals should avoid vicious debates, cheap shots at garnering votes and realize their obligation before history. Any and all individuals and groups who have something to say toward a solution should assume their share of the burden, including politicians, non-governmental organizations, trade unions and academics.

This society has been suffering a trauma for the past thirty years, but because the children of parliamentarians, bureaucrats, ministers, and army members do not serve their military terms in that region, the problem is not being solved. Once the children of decision-makers begin performing their services in the region, the problem will be solved quickly.

Over the course of the solution process, the "humanity" common denominator needs to be put forth as the identity we belong in. The emphasis on ethnic origins has always been divisive and sought to ostracize. None of our identities should supersede humanity as our common denominator.

Public opinion needs to be formed together with other non-governmental organizations to nullify all constitutional and legal regulations blocking discussion on the Kurdish Question. Starting with local governments, wider segments

of the public must be drawn to peace movements in order to rule out violence and so that other cultures and faiths can express themselves freely.

A committee of Kurdish and Turkish intellectuals must be set up, which should establish short-, mid- and long-term practices that need to be undertaken so that a climate can emerge in which Turkey can face her own historical facts, and public and private organizations such as the Turkish Grand National Assembly, United Nations, European Parliament, European Court of Human Rights must be delivered the list of those practices.

Because the words ‘Kurd’, ‘terror’ and ‘separatism’ are used together, our region suffers from a serious image problem. In the long-run, an image restoration is necessary. To that end, bridges of morality must be built between East and Southeast regions and the other regions, people here should travel over there, those over there should visit here. It is absolutely necessary to ensure the involvement of religious community organizations in these efforts, as they have substantial influence on society.

## EXPECTATIONS FROM KURDS

In roundtables, expectations from Kurds were separately expressed in addition to remarks on the responsibilities that fell on the shoulders of the society for a solution. These expectations can be summarized as follows:

It’s the state that is always expected to craft the solution. There’s no doubt that grave mistakes were committed in governing this country, but if there will be a solution, the two sides, that is Turks and Kurds, must act together. The people in the region must lend a hand to the solution. You solve a problem with the involvement of those who experience it, who are aggrieved by it. You can’t solve it against their will. No result will be achieved by trying to come up with a solution without paying attention to the people who are parties to the issue. You can’t find a solution against the will of the aggrieved party. No one is able to say “Talk to Kandil”, but if the problem is to be solved, people in the mountains need to be brought back.

Violence must be abandoned and rejected without any ‘but’s or ‘however’s or other conditional statements. Such phrases served a function in keeping the question on the agenda, but today they are impediments before a solution. If we don’t want to create a ‘Turkish Question’, we need to prevent that.

The non-governmental organizations, sheiks, leaders of religious orders must absolutely be involved in these efforts, and groups of empathy must be constituted.

Focus must be on how all that is being said and done for solving the question is being perceived in the west. For instance, the yearning for peace in the East and Southeast is currently generating feelings of animosity on this side.

## CONSTRUCTING A NEW LANGUAGE

As noted previously, while the issue of language and tone was not an individual agenda item, it was referred to by participants in almost all sessions of the meetings. Language- and tone-related analyses and recommendations toward a solution can be summarized as follows:

When managing the process, the political authority needs to use a language that is responsible, calming and sensitive. In the meantime, objections and critiques by relatives of martyrs and veterans need to be understood within the framework of the Turkish proverb “an ember burns where it falls” and must be given consideration at all costs.

It is necessary to use a fresh language. Not just the state, the Kurds must also construct a novel language and talk through it.

Tone is important for a solution to be reached. What matters is that a shared language must be created for use on the street. Political parties or various institutions can establish dialog among themselves relatively easily in any case. But the problem is now a part of society. So what really matters is the tone adopted in social relations. You can have a separate struggle against state policies. But attention must primarily be paid to everyday practices performed daily in society.

Dialog is necessary for a solution, and you need someone you can address to have a dialog. In that sense, it is much more difficult to start a dialog with the young generations. Because, a very strong nationalism is on the rise on both sides. The last generation with which you can discuss things is Osman Baydemir, Ahmet Türk, Aysel Tuğluk, etc. who are the voices today. While the youth here are sent off to serve their military terms in a celebratory mood, those in the region are similarly sent off to the mountains festively. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that issues are mutual here. Therefore the language of the solution needs to have an egalitarian character.

Kurds aren't the only ones living in the East. If the debate will involve how the problem will be solved democratically within the Republic of Turkey, and not the establishment of a separate Kurdish state, the other groups need to be paid attention too, and a pertinent attitude and language must be developed, and the solution must be devised accordingly.

The discourse around "rehabilitating Kurds" is a means of ostracizing Kurds. We need to watch what we say and hurt no one.

Kurds, Sunnis, Alevis, everyone asks for freedoms and democracy for themselves. But it is necessary to be able to act jointly against the common source of the grievance.

## EXPECTATIONS FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND STATE INSTITUTIONS

Naturally, most of the recommendations offered at the meetings for a solution were addressed at the government. Some of the recommendations have to do with the process, others with managing perceptions, and while a part of them concerns the necessary constitutional and legal arrangements, others relate directly to specific practices. The following recommendations stood out among others:

A democratic and peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question is only possible if simultaneous steps are taken in political, cultural, economic and other areas. The great majority of Kurds firstly want political and cultural rights, and the right to education in their native language, the resolution of the problems borne out of forced displacements, payment of damages, issuing a non-conditional general amnesty, and the development of appropriate ways and methods to bring PKK members in the mountains back to political and social life. All reasonable parties have to acknowledge that the Kurdish Question cannot be solved through military means. As long as armed conflict continues, steps toward a solution will not yield any result, as is known.

All the policy and academic studies conducted on the Kurdish Question need to be brought together, and all aspects and causes of the question (economic, political, social, psychological, educational) need to be laid down and a short-, medium- and long-term solution with multiple dimensions must be developed.

The election threshold must be abolished; the law on political parties must be amended. Strong democratic channels need to be made available for a solution and tension must be reduced with methods such as these.

Information desks should be set up to inform victims of forced migration of the "Return to Village and Rehabilitation Project" (KDRP) and Law No. 5233 under the auspices of governors' offices in cities and provinces and of district governors' offices in districts that are receiving large numbers of migrants. A time limit must be put in place in relation to the evaluation of applications by individuals aggrieved by terror. Otherwise the loss assessment process would be excessively prolonged.

The village guard system must be eliminated as it is a major problem in and of itself and leads to several other problems, but measures must be taken in relation to recruitment of former village guards into other (civilian) jobs.

In the short-run, measures such as making the pastures available, offering economic incentives and providing greater access to animal husbandry can be taken, however, in the long-run cultural changes are required.

The *Ergenekon* case offers a significant opportunity to lay bare the main factors underlying the origin of question. Bringing the *Ergenekon* case to a conclusion in a sound and fair manner will be an important threshold for the solution of the Kurdish Question. Resolution of the *Ergenekon* case will also help breed a strong hope that certain things can actually change. It is critically important that the third indictment concerns the Southeast.

While detainees frequently come out as corpses out of jail, *Ergenekon* suspects are released at the slightest headache. Regulations must be effected to ensure the release or at least postpone the sentences of detainees and convicts who are sick.

The issue of general amnesty must be prioritized, and amnesty terms need to be discussed in detail without any hesitation. There is no way to solve the question without ignoring the issue of general amnesty.

In the long-run, realizing constitutional amendments, or more appropriately, adopting a new, civil and democratic Constitution is very important. This issue should never fall off the agenda.

As long as it's not an official language, Kurdish should be able to be used everywhere and in the public sphere. To that end, regulations must be effected to provide for Kurdish-language education in all schools. Kurdish language and literature must be offered at all educational institutions. The government must conduct a study for the internalization of universal human rights norms. Everyone needs to have basic information about universal human rights norms.

Physicians can have certain roles to play in preventing discrimination and ensuring social peace. For instance, the Public Employee Foreign Language Proficiency Exam (*Kamu Personeli Yabancı Dil Bilgisi Seviye Tespit Sınavı, KPDS*) can test the Kurdish language proficiency of doctors. Additional compensation or a supplementary consultation fee may be paid to doctors who have acquired a certain level of Kurdish and communicate with Kurdish patients directly in Kurdish. Incentives like that can both function as an apology, a form of tangible encouragement on the part of Turks, and an important factor in preventing discrimination.

The recent instances of oppression, torture and detentions involving children tense up the political and psychological environment; block potential positive dialog between the parties; sustain feelings of hatred; fan the flames of conflict; and distance members of society even further from one another, and thereby create very negative results. These must come to a halt to ensure immediate cessation of clashes and the operations must be stopped.

Losses suffered by anyone since 12 September 1980 must be compensated for, and the indemnities and wages of individuals discharged from their jobs for whatever reason must be paid, and necessary regulations must be effected to reinstate people to their jobs if they wish.

Unconditional general amnesty must be declared, and the legislation preventing social, political and economic participation of people who have been stripped of their citizenship must be amended.

The Turks have suffered from injustices as much as the Kurds did. The Kurds were hit by cheating the Turks. If the state will apologize to the Kurds in the future, it must do the same to the Turks for having cheated them.

An individual ministry must be established to work on a durable solution for all these problems.







# SECTION FIVE



# Decision-Makers and the Kurdish Question

At the meeting held in Ankara with decision-makers, the aim was to focus on the solution of the problem. Accordingly, the situation was assessed and actors were analyzed first, and discussion then focused on what a solution package to be presented to the public should include at a minimum. Below is a summary of the thoughts offered in that regard:

## ASSESSING THE SITUATION

Remarks by the President, Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior and Chief of Staff show a new process has begun. The President has said “we are in agreement”, which is very important. But the remarks by political party groups indicate that opposition parties are not part of the consensus. The government must involve the opposition in the process no matter what.

Likewise, statements by the PKK break with the past and involve major shifts. These changes need to be heeded, first of all.

There is a favorable context thanks in part to international developments. The US decided to get out of Iraq and wants to leave the country as a conflict-free zone upon exit as much as possible, and to establish proximity between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. Therefore, it is necessary to clear that area from weapons, not from the PKK *per se*.

A consensus needs to be created, but the attitude of the opposition is not helping the process. And civil society needs to assume more of the burden, as a result.

When weapons are laid down, the media generally doesn't take note. Reporting only the conflicts pushes the average citizen into a fear that the country will be divided.

In what was Former Yugoslavia, minorities have rights granted at the time of Tito, and they are able to conduct educational activities in their respective native languages. With their notion of democracy, people in Kosovo have no problem with that; they don't consider it a privilege. For instance, 30,000 Turks there have the right to receive education in their own language all the way from grade school to university. Turkey's official policy is to support those democratic rights of Turks in Kosovo. But when it comes to education in native language in the context of Kurdish, those very rights defended in Kosovo, Greece or Bulgaria are easily forgotten.

State institutions are seen to have a general and favorable consensus. There is no going back from this point. No one indeed has the right, or the chance, to go back. But it is necessary to note that the government lagged far behind the expectations it set in 2005.

The democratic initiatives between 1999 and 2004 warmed the hearts of the people in the region towards the country at large, and allowed the government to enjoy support from that region. But the time that lapsed since 2004 is a major waste.

## ANALYZING THE ACTORS

In analyzing actors, participants have offered honest assessments of especially their own parties and attitudes, contributed critiques when necessary and also discussed the mistakes they made in the past. At the end of these exchanges, a consensus emerged that the parties should not extract feelings of victory or loss out of the efforts they will spend toward solving the question.

The unconditional disarmament proposal points to a novel political path for the PKK, and this process must be understood well and accurately. A process that excludes the PKK will not be effective. So we need to comprehend this process correctly.

Murat Karayılan's remarks<sup>11</sup> show that the PKK is essentially prioritizing disarmament and they have postponed their constitutional reform demands for the time being, and that they only have demands for the reinforcement of local governments. There is a relevant draft law waiting at the Assembly for a long time, so that demand is not a radical one. So they seem to have put aside the "Kurds need to be have autonomous government" demand for now.

Up until now the PKK thought they would be able to subdue Turkey with arms, but they understood that guns take you only to a certain point and no further. Moreover, developments in Iraq that take place beyond the PKK's control and despite the PKK indicate that the organization may no longer resort to arms. Therefore the PKK also needs to adopt a new policy and launch a struggle that excludes arms.

Nevertheless, the PKK is seen to have been developing self-confidence. It appears they are planning to organize politically in cities. For now, the issue of constitutional reform needs to be set aside, and disarming the PKK is to be advanced as the primary demand and the rest should be left to the natural flow of the political process.

Additionally, it is necessary to keep in mind that the PKK came to this day by taking up arms and it will be quite difficult for them to drop arms, and that it is an incredibly flexible organization. It is far from certain how ready the state is in the face of that. In fact, the PKK had come to a similar point in 1993. After Abdullah Öcalan was brought to Turkey, the PKK pulled all of their armed cadres behind the border and sent a group to Turkey as peace messengers. But these messengers were tried and put in prison; neither a withdrawal was allowed nor a positive attitude was displayed to those who separated from the organization.

Back in the old times, PKK members would have considered Karayılan's remarks as signs of weakness, but they too have realized that there is no solution through guns. However, those PKK members who spent considerable time in the mountains and served jail time and later tried to conduct political activity as members of DTP have of late been detained, which blocks the politicization of the organization. This is a very wrong policy.

When you look at the political authority, you see that while Ak Parti has members who are for freedoms and democracy, there are others there who stand closer to military circles. That's why the ruling party feels the need to maintain an equilibrium. But calculations for an equilibrium should not block a stance in favor of a democratic solution.

DTP members are elected and they are in the Grand National Assembly. It is not legitimate to question their right to represent. Therefore, efforts toward a solution must include DTP members as part of the discussion. However, while taking a step to a solution, neither the PKK nor Öcalan may be ignored.

After trying all sorts of measures over many years, security forces too have realized that arms don't bring a solution and that responsibility and authority primarily lie with political institutions. Therefore, the army should gradually leave the initiative to politics. But for many years Turkish Armed Forces had a habit of intervening in politics in its large-scale as well as everyday issues.

There is no seriously negative reaction from the public, either. Although the opposition does not look very promising, DTP cadres have acquired a habit of conducting politics in the parliament and begun to understand the demands of the other side. They have been voicing realizable demands. Had the election threshold been set at less than 10% in the Political Parties Law, DTP members would have come to the Assembly sooner and with a larger group and have contributed more substantially to the solution. However, we have come to the point of "If there will be a solution with DTP, then let it be with the DTP of our preference", and operations were launched against DTP. The latest operations against DTP are quite meaningful. But if the PKK is indeed politicizing, they shouldn't be jailed for that, instead they should be encouraged.

Everyone should engage in their process of self-reflection. It is as if the PKK is preparing itself for this new process. They have also come to the point of a democratic solution. But political authority is unable to leave behind the mentality and approach of "whatever I'll do, I'll do it on my own".

Turkish Grand National Assembly is the only place where this question is to be discussed. AKP and DTP have significant responsibilities in that regard.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the remarks by Murat Karayılan, the PKK leader in Mount Quandil, in his interview with Hasan Cemal of the Milliyet daily in May 2009, where he emphasized demands relating to PKK's laying down of arms, reinforcement of local governments and the granting of cultural rights. For information, please refer to dailies published in May 2009.

## STEPS TO BE TAKEN TOWARD A SOLUTION

There are two ways to think about the solution process/package: A solution package including everything from disarmament to rights, or a declaration by the highest political authorities on the main elements of the solution which retains a level of uncertainty and then monitoring things as they go along. The first one is the ideal one. But given Turkey's realities, it does not come forth as the ideal solution. The second one looks more reasonable.

The political authority needs to take the risk in order for this question to be solved. Without performing political balancing acts, the political authority needs to have faith in democracy and solve the problem through democratic initiatives.

The new Constitution should contain arrangements inclusive of Kurds and their cultures, recognizing their identity and concerning education in Kurdish language. To that end, Kurdology institutes need to be set up at universities and means should be provided to improve the use of the Kurdish language.

Some kind of lobbying is necessary; when the process hits a deadlock, an intervention must be made. This requires the identification of the language in which the process will move forward. From time to time, reminders should be offered along the way to the DTP and Ak Parti, and people from CHP and MHP with a constructive approach need to be made part of the process. Accordingly:

- Reforms must continue;
- constitutional citizenship must be taken as the basis;
- all obstacles before the Kurdish language must be removed;
- the *Ergenekon* case must be concluded in a way to encompass the region;
- efforts must focus on disarming the PKK;
- village guards must be decommissioned.

Kurds have no responsibility in this issue's blowing out of proportions, however, Kurds are the main actors in a process of normalization. The heart of the matter is in fact democratization.

There is a fundamental problem of trust between the state and the Kurds. An environment of trust must be created. Furthermore, Turkey needs to question itself. That's why the *Ergenekon* case is important. This questioning must at all costs be brought to completion. Otherwise, neither the Kurdish issue, nor any other democratization problem can be solved.

Politics is the only ground on which to find a solution. But a solution will come to fruition in the right context and time. Priorities must be set accurately. If these three parameters are there, a solution might be real. First the actors who are parties to the issue need to figure out what, and how, they can contribute.

The media must also be a party to and a part of the solution.

## Conclusion and Remarks

Meetings held in different regions with participants from a variety of circles show that Kurds, who live in the west and partake in Kurdish political life actively, have a more uncompromising perspective, stronger views and a harsher language and discourse than Kurds of similar political convictions living in the Eastern and Southeastern regions. Similarly, it has been observed that most of the non-Kurds living in the west are only minimally knowledgeable about the Kurdish issue, and much of they know is indeed inaccurate. More importantly, this state of ignorance or having the wrong information leads those participants to adopting prejudiced and sometimes hateful attitudes toward Kurds. These observations indicate that feelings of discrimination and hate are on the rise among the public, and absent an intervention, we might face the threat of those feelings turning into hostility and conflict. Nevertheless, the major benefit of the meetings was that it provided a ground on which people who are from different social segments residing in the same province but are not establishing contact got to encounter and meet one another through this question. Participants have indeed noted that they at least had the chance to listen to one another and review their respective assumptions.

Even the staunch opponents of the initiative have not raised serious objections to the reforms implemented by the government, which is a sign that the public is not particularly well informed of the initiative, contrary to what political and media circles claim, and that everyone in fact wants a solution as soon as possible and one way or the other. Indeed, many participants complained that authorities have failed to tell the public the truth, and emphasized that the public grasped it rather very late that the issue stems from a people having been robbed of their natural, human, political, social and cultural rights. In that regard, it was noted quite frequently that Turkey would have been at a much different point on the path toward the solution had the issue been laid out clearly from the outset. Accordingly, it was pointed that negligent policies avoiding the main issue should be dropped and both the state and the society need to be encouraged to face the truth.

Discussions at the meetings show that there is a serious problem of information flow regarding the Kurdish Question. Thanks also to very effective disinformation by the media, the public is still lacking a comprehensive picture of the goings-on in the region and does not fall for the bits and pieces of information it receives. Therefore, members of parliament, intellectuals, non-governmental organizations and other actors who are interested in the Kurdish Question and democratization need to communicate and converse with each other more frequently and intensely. Should the occasion arise, an initiative group must be set up toward that end, and closer exchange needs to be made on developments and policies to be followed. This is because it is necessary to take the stone off the hand of the stone-throwing child, bring back those who took to the mountains, ensure the safe return of those who originate from all over Turkey to serve their military term, and to be able to do all of these at the same time.

Although it is frequently said that the problem is as old as the Republic itself, the Kurdish Question dates centuries back. Therefore, a solution will naturally take some time. To understand why the problem, despite its long history, has not evolved into a civil war, needs asking questions taking into account the many dimensions of the problem and calls for a fresh perspective, and a novel discourse that utilizes those values we actually carry but do not appreciate enough. Thus, it will be misleading to reduce the issue to simply a matter of rights and entitlements or to politics or governance.

Although it is well known and many people attest that the Kurdish Question has multiple aspects, there has been no shortage of clashes throughout the history of the Republic, and as a result especially of the last thirty-three years, the problem has become an overly politicized one. History has unfortunately repeated itself yet again, and in the case of the Kurdish Question, too, the political cast a shadow over the social and the humane. This inevitably leads to the society's being involved in the issue's political side but ignoring that painful, shameful human drama that remains behind it. In fact, we all have our share of the responsibility for that drama. All told, however, the path to a durable solution is easy to follow: We must manage to be fair, want for ourselves what we would have wanted for others, and not do unto others what we do not want others do unto us...

## About the Authors

**YILMAZ ENSAROĞLU** was born in Ağrı in 1959. He graduated from Ankara University Theology Faculty. From the year of 1978 to 1980, he worked as Secretary General of Structuring, Secretary General and General Manager in Öz Gıda Working Syndicate. In 1991, Organization of Human Rights & Solidarity for Oppressed People (MAZLUMDER) was established and he was elected for membership of executive board at the first General Meeting of the organization which was carried out in 1992. He worked there as Deputy General Manager from 1993 to 1996 and General Manager from 1996 to 2004. He resigned his duty on his own will in the general meeting which was carried out on 30 May 2004. In 2005-2006 he conducted research at Durham University (England) on human rights and security issues. He is still a member of MAZLUMDER, Human Rights Agenda Association and Human Rights Research Association and Chief Editor of bimonthly magazine Dialogue for Human Rights, published by IHOP. He is still working as Coordinator of Law and Human Rights Studies at SETA Foundation in Ankara. He is married and has one son.

**DİLEK KURBAN** received her bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations from Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. She received her Master's in International Affairs (MIA) in human rights from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and her Juris Doctor (JD) degree from Columbia Law School. Between 1999 and 2001, she worked as an Associate Political Affairs Officer at the Security Council Affairs Division of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs in New York. Currently, she is the Program Director for the Democratization Program of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and an adjunct professor of law at the Political Science Department of Boğaziçi University. She is an editor for Agos, a Turkish-Armenian bilingual weekly. She published in the areas of minority and human rights in Turkey, internal displacement in Turkey and European minority and human rights law. She is a columnist for the daily, *Radikal*.



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DİLEK KURBAN





**TESEV**

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han,  
No: 2, Kat: 3 Karaköy 34420, İstanbul  
T +90 212 292 89 03 PBX  
F +90 212 292 90 46  
info@tesev.org.tr  
www.tesev.org.tr

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