

Kurds in Turkey: Between assimilation and suppression

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Introduction

Red flags with a half moon and a star are waving in a street in Ankara, pretending to be part of a celebration. Behind those banners, broken windows can be spotted and reveal their real purpose- showing unity and covering the damages. It is May 23, 2007, one day after one of the worst suicide bombings in the history of Turkey. Six people died instantly, three more in the hospital and over 120 were badly wounded. The man responsible for this attack was the 28-year old Güven Akkus from the predominantly Kurdish Southeast. Meanwhile the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) denied any involvement, Ankara's governor Kemal Onal blamed the group of carrying out the attack: "The type of the explosives and equipment used is similar to those used by the separatist group" (Dowling 2007).

This case is just one example of a long list of incidents between the Turkish state and the PKK, which fights for an autonomic Kurdish state. The bitter result of this struggle is that more than 40,000 have died in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, nearly 30,000 of them members of the PKK (cf. Yackley 2010). This acrimonious fight is not only about their own state, but also for an identity as a nation. Scattered in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, colonial interests worked against them depriving their self-determination and statehood. This essay will address the Kurdish issue of identity and asks whether or not Turkey's policy aims to achieve assimilation or promotes repression of the minority.

Most countries in the Middle East suffer from the fundamental problem of national identity. More than 75 years after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define and maintain an identity that is both inclusive and representative. Two reasons are given for this. First of all, none of these countries are homogeneous; they consist of numerous ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural minorities. Taking Turkey as an example, Turks are living together with three officially recognized minorities (Greeks, Armenians, Jews) and with a mosaic of other non-officially recognized ethnic groups (the biggest ones are the Kurds, Zaza and Circassians). The other reason can be traced back to imperialism and colonialism. The disbanding of the Ottoman Empire was anything but smooth and the states were carved out with little concern for the people, culture, religion or history. That said, those states were neither homogeneous nor cohesive and were only held together by an artificial boundary. The driving force behind this process was the imperial legacy of the British and French; some ethnic groups were put together into one state or one nation was divided among other states. The dispersal of the Kurds

in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq symbolizes the latter. Ultimately, the diverse countries of the Middle East have to face the issue of giving themselves an identity that reflects their heterogeneity and this couldn't be imposed from above. "In other parts of the world, nations, both old and new, have become states; the process has been reversed in the Middle East where states are still in search of a nation" (Kumaraswam 2006). This process can only be accomplished when the various minorities can identify with the state they are living in, receiving an identity and thus shaping the state identity at the same time – a reciprocal evolution.

Kurds in Turkey

As already mentioned, the Kurdish people live separated by the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq in the roughly geo-cultural area called Kurdistan wherein they form the prominent majority. The whole Kurdish population is estimated to between 25 -30 million people, which makes them the fourth largest ethnic group of the Middle East. Roughly 14 million Kurds (~18% of the whole Turkish population) live in the southeastern part of Turkey. The Turkish constitution provides a single nationality designation for all Turks and thus does not recognize ethnic groups as national, racial or ethnic minorities. Therefore a true census has been historically unavailable. Nonetheless, millions of the country's citizens, mainly in the southeast, identify themselves as Kurds. Those who publicly or politically assert their Kurdish identity in the public domain risk public censure, harassment, or even prosecution. However, many Kurds who are long-term residents in the industrialized cities in the west are often getting assimilated into the political, economic, and social life of the nation. To understand the Turkish policy of assimilation and suppression, it is also necessary to understand the history of Turkey.

After the end of World War 1 the Allies occupied Istanbul and Izmir and prompted the establishment of a Turkish national movement. A young cadre of military officers, led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha (better known as Atatürk), expelled the invaders and founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Soon after the establishment of the state, the government passed a series of laws to serve as the foundation of a new nation. Ethnic diversity was perceived as a danger to the integrity of the state, and the Kurds, as the largest minority group, were obviously a serious threat. They were decreed to be Turks and as a result, their language, culture, dress, family names and even village names had to be Turkish. This was realized through plenty of prohibitions. It was forbidden to speak their language in cities and towns, all external symbols of their ethnic identity were suppressed, Turkish teachers were sent to Kurdish villages with the teaching of Kurdish as their chief objective, and distinctive Kurdish dress was forbidden (cf. Bruinessen 1989: 8). The closing down of medreses (Kurdish centers of education and cultural transmission), though not exclusively directed against the Kurds, were felt as major blows to Kurdish culture. By the end of the 1960s, the last one had disappeared. "These assimilation policies were backed up by a new

historical doctrine according to which the Kurds were really Turks originally, but had by historical accident lost their language” (ibid.).

It goes without saying that many Kurds fought against those measures of suppression, some with peaceful protests, others with violence both against the Turkish state and their own ethnic group. The first uprisings began in the 1930's, which were all suppressed by the Turkish government. As a result of these movements, millions of Kurds were forcibly relocated between 1925 and 1938. Meanwhile, other ethnic groups like the Circassians were settled in the Kurdish districts, all attempts to speed up the Turkicisation of the Kurds. The “Ararat Revolt”, one of the biggest revolts, was stopped after a massive military campaign (roughly 66,000 Turkish soldiers) including the destruction of many Kurdish villages.

In the 1980's the PKK started a full-scale insurgency when announcing the Kurdish uprising. It was the beginning of a bloody battle not only against the Turkish military and civilians but also against their own ethnicity. According to human rights organizations, the PKK killed and tortured peasants and its own members because they were suspected of being collaborators. The PKK is considered by the US, the EU, and NATO to be a terrorist organization. Although the leader of the PKK Abdullah Öcalan was arrested in 1999, the conflict still continues today. It is worthy to mention, that a considerable number of Kurds believe, that the Turkish state would not even recognize their identity without the existence of the PKK (cf. Tezcur 2007). That said it is without a doubt that the intention of the PKK is to defeat Turkey, which is impossible. It seems more likely, in the context of the lack of identity among the Kurds and the Turkish policy of denying the Kurdish ethnicity, that the terror attacks can be seen as a desperate shout of Kurds, that they exist in their unique culture and differ from the majority. The depth of the fear of “Kurdistan” can be illustrated and understood by a quotation of a Turkish journalist, “And a Kurdistan is a major red line for Turkey. Even the word is taboo. [...] it is worth noting that we are often told that the Turkish flag is bright red to forever remind us of the blood that was shed to create this country. Nationalism, and its attendant paranoia, runs deep” (Turgut 2007).

The lesson of a “dual strategy”

Summarizing the mentioned measures of the Turkish policy, it can be said, that Turkey employed a dual strategy towards the Kurds, repression as well as assimilation. Banning the Kurdish language and prohibiting distinctive Kurdish dress can be seen as examples of fear of the Kurdish nationalism and thus a repression of their culture. Furthermore this kind of policy does not only discriminate against the Kurds but also makes it hard for them to find their real identity. The language is maybe the most important variable for a human being to identify him/herself with a nation or ethnic group. On the other hand, those Kurds who did not openly express their Kurdish identity are able to integrate into the Turkish society. Many prominent statesmen and public figures in Tur-

key like Sebahat Tunel, a female parliament member, have Kurdish origins and a successful job. Second, due to the fact of the competitive and pluralistic election system, the Kurds had the possibility to integrate into the Turkish political system as well. Moreover, parties recognized the potential power of the Kurdish voters and tried to make their program attractive for them. In the 2007 elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) mobilized the Kurdish vote and won. Third, the Turkish state and politicians have periodically attempted to promote Islamic identity as a counterweight to the exclusive and conflict-promoting tendencies of both Turkish and Kurdish nationalism (cf. Tezcur 2007).

Conclusion

The dual strategy of repression and assimilation has been partially successful. Millions of Kurds who are living in the cosmopolitan areas of Turkey have mostly avoided being identified with Kurdish nationalism and thus assimilated. The passed laws were not aiming at the integrated Kurdish citizens in the central and western region of Turkey but on the Southeast. Ankara fearing the possibility of a Kurdish nationalistic uprising, tried to ignore the minority and only saw the PKK. However, guns have never managed to eliminate Kurdish rebellion. Mr. Erdogan now has to open his eyes and become aware of the largest minority in Turkey. A new policy designed to address Kurdish grievances, encourage economic growth, and stop discrimination would be the best practice. It would not only enable the integration of the Kurds into the Turkish society but also give them notice of being an ethnic group and thus an identity. Perhaps it will also allow the Turkish flag to wave in the air as a sign of unity and diversity as opposed to covering broken windows.

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