

Banditry to Disloyalty: the Kurdish Question in Turkey

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Kurds' status in (national-) political community in Turkey has never been unambiguous. Although Kurds have in principal been considered proper members of Turkish nation, there are instances in which Kurds were seen outside of the circle of Turkishness. This ambiguity in the status of Kurds vis-à-vis Turkishness is due mostly to the fact that the Turkish state, or the *establishment* in Turkey, has not maintained a stable image of Kurds. The most appropriate term to define this unstable image of Kurds is, to my mind, 'prospective-Turks'. In other words, the Turkish Republic has, in principal, perceived Kurds as Turks-to-be.

While Kurds have, in principal, been considered prospective-Turks throughout the Republican period, they were perceived by the founders of the Republic during the years of the foundation of the Turkish Republic not as prospective-Turks, but as an ethnic group with the right to self-rule. The prospective founders of the new regime had declared in 1921 that a kind of autonomy was to be granted to the Kurds.¹

However, the portrayal of Kurds as an ethnic group with the right to self-rule changed in 1924, when a new constitution replaced the 1921 Constitution. While the 1924 Constitution still recognised the existence of various ethnic groups in Turkey, it also stated that no special rights of any kind would be granted to these communities.² In other words, by 1924, the Turkish Republic began to perceive Kurds as an ethnic community with no group rights. In the eyes of the Turkish state, Kurds, just like other citizens of the Republic, had become Turks. There were no more Kurds but simply Turkish citizens. From then on, the establishment in Turkey began to perceive Kurdish resistance and the Kurdish question in Turkey within this light. The Kurdish question in Turkey became, in the eyes of the Republic, no longer an ethno-political question but a question of reactionary politics, banditry, tribal resistance and regional backwardness. The

¹ "Building a local government in the lands inhabited by Kurds" was defined as a part of the "Kurdistan policy" of the Ministry of Council. See TBMM *Gizli Celse Zabıtları*, v. III [Minutes of Secret Sessions], (Ankara: İş Bankası Yayınları, 1985), 551. The idea of having a local autonomy in Turkey was echoed in the 1921 Constitution too. 1921 Constitution stipulated that the local provinces in Turkey were to have full autonomy in local affairs. See Ergun Özbudun *1921 Anayasası* [1921 Constitution], (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 1992), 43-44, 82-83.

² This new policy was spelled in the introduction of the new Constitution: "Our state is a nation state. It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognise any nation other than Turks. There are other peoples which come from different races [ethnic groups] and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial [ethnic] status". See Şeref Gözübüyük & Zekai Sezgin *1924 Anayasası Hakkında Meclis Görüşmeleri* [Parliamentary Sessions on 1924 Constitution], (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayını, 1957), 7.

resisters were not Kurds with an ethno-political cause, but simply *Kurdish tribes*, *Kurdish bandits*, *Kurdish sheikhs*, all the evils of Turkey's pre-modern past in other words. However, regardless of whether they were proper citizens or bandits and reactionaries, Kurds were considered as prospective-Turks and this became the meta-image of Kurds during the Republic.

The fact that Kurds have been perceived as prospective-Turks has come to shape their experience with citizenship practices. While non-Muslim citizens of the Republic have regularly been subject to discriminatory practices of citizenship, Kurdish citizens like other Muslim citizens of the Republic, have never been subject to discrimination in a consistent manner.³ Instead, Kurds have mostly been subject to assimilation, and quite a many Kurd have become Turkified during the eighty years of the Republic.

Assimilation

The assimilation of Kurds has been neither voluntary nor spontaneous. Instead, the policy of Turkification, especially in the first few decades of the Republic, was implemented mostly through means of compulsory assimilation. A comprehensive documentation of the means of compulsory assimilation utilized by the Turkish state may be found in the numerous reports prepared by the Turkish bureaucracy.⁴ It is understood from such documents that displacement and compulsory settlement have been the privileged instruments of the assimilation of Kurds.⁵ However, other instruments have been used too. For instance, after the foundation of the Republic, traditional religious schools in Kurdish regions, which were instrumental in reproducing Kurdish cultural practices were closed and publication in Kurdish was not allowed. During the heyday of the Republic even speaking Kurdish in public was forbidden. More recent

³ Non-Muslim citizens of the country have been subject to numerous instances of discrimination in the republican period. For instance, many non-Muslims were fired from their jobs and they were not hired by bureaucracy. The State Employee Law enacted in 1926 defined Turkishness as a necessary condition to become a state employee and the Wealth Tax Law enacted in 1942 was designed so as to confiscate a part of the wealth owned by non-Muslims in Turkey. Likewise, estates owned by the foundations built by non-Muslim citizens were confiscated. For an examination of such practices see M. Çağatay Okutan *Tek Parti Döneminde Azınlık Politikaları* [Minority Policies in the Single Party Period], (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2004), Baskın Oran *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar* [Minorities in Turkey], (İstanbul: İletişim, 2004) and Hüseyin Sadoğlu *Türkiye'de Ulusçuluk ve Dil Politikaları* [Nationalism and Language Policies in Turkey], (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2003).

⁴ For such reports see Mehmet Bayrak *Kürdoloji Belgeleri* [Kurdology Documents], (Ankara: Özge Yayınları, 1994).

⁵ There have been numerous instances of compulsory settlement during the republican period. A recent research indicates that more than a million people were forcibly evacuated from their villages in the last decade. See HÜNEE (Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü) *Türkiye'de Göç ve Yerinden Olmuş Nüfus Araştırması* [Research on Migration and Displaced Population in Turkey], (Ankara: 2006).

examples of Kurdish language suppression are exemplified in Law 2932, enacted in 1983. This law, which was cancelled in 1991, prohibited publication and broadcasting in Kurdish. Even today, Article 42 of the current constitution prohibits the instruction of a language other than Turkish as the mother tongue for Turkish citizens.

Ensuing Turkification of surnames, the names of villages and the names of local places are other examples of assimilation strategies. The third article of the Surname Law of 1934 prohibited using “the names of tribes, foreign races and foreign nations” as surnames. Likewise, the Provincial Administration Law of 1949 authorised the Ministry of Internal Affairs to change the names of places and this authority was used quite liberally.⁶ Moreover, article 16 of the 1972 Population Law prohibited giving Kurdish names to new-borns. Specifically, this law prohibited giving “such names which are not in accordance with our national culture”.⁷

A more favoured method of assimilation of Kurds during the Republic has been boarding schools. A number of boarding schools were established in the Kurdish region with the aim of educating Kurdish boys and girls in a physical environment that could separate them from their families and cultural habitat. Assimilation of Kurds through boarding schools continues today. Figures provided by the Ministry of National Education today show that, of 299 boarding schools in Turkey, 155 (52 per cent) are in the Kurdish populated provinces of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia. Similarly, of 142.788 students total, 84,442 (59 per cent) are enrolled in a boarding school in such provinces.⁸

The following conclusion can be drawn from the above narrative: unlike non-Muslim citizens who have often been subject to state-sponsored discrimination, Kurdish citizens have mainly been subject to assimilation. In fact, a large number of Kurds have assimilated into mainstream Turkish society since the foundation of the Republic.

Until recently, this simple fact had been seen by the Turkish State as evidence of Kurds’ inclination towards being the loyal members of the Turkish political community. However, there are now signs which indicate that this belief in Kurds’ loyalty is not as strong as it once was. Before exploring this erosion in the belief in Kurds’ loyalty further, it is first necessary to explain how assimilationist and discriminatory practices of citizenship have been simultaneously pursued in Turkey.

⁶ For the instances of changing the names of places see “Türkiye Mülki İdari Bölümleri: Belediyeler Köyler”, TC İçişleri Bakanlığı İller İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, Genel Yayın No: 408 Seri III No. 4.

⁷ <http://www.hukuki.net/kanun/1587.15.frameset.asp>. Population Law of 1972 was amended in 2003. Law numbered 4928 enacted on 15 July 2003 cancelled the statement “in accordance with our national culture”. For this amendment see <http://www.hukuki.net/kanun/2932.15.frameset.asp>

⁸ <http://apk.meb.gov.tr/yayinlar/2004-2005%20Milli%20Egitim%20Sayisal%20Verileri>.

Citizenship and Ethnicity in Turkey

Why have Kurds mostly been subject to assimilation, while non-Muslim citizens have experienced a great deal of discrimination in public? To put it boldly, the asymmetry in question has to do with the fact that Turkishness, as defined by Turkish Constitutions, has been both open and closed to non-Turks. This simultaneous openness and non-openness of Turkishness is spelled out in the first constitution of the Republic. Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution was as follows: “the people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would, in terms of citizenship, be considered Turkish.” At first sight, article 88 gives the impression that Turkishness was open to all inhabitants of the country regardless of their ethnic or religious origins. However, a closer reading of this article suggests otherwise. This is best illustrated by comparing the wordings of Article 88 as it was first introduced in the Assembly and when it finally passed from the Assembly as a constitutional article. The article initially read as follows: “The people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would be called Turkish.” As it is seen, when article 88 became a constitutional one, it began to involve a surplus statement: “in terms of citizenship”. A careful reading of the minutes of the parliament shows that the qualification in the wording of Article 88 was strategic. This surplus statement was added because the assembly was not comfortable with the idea of identifying Turkishness with a status achievable by every inhabitant of the country irrespective of ethnic or religious origin. Eventually, the 1924 Constitution stratified Turkishness into two: “Turkishness as citizenship” and “Turkishness as such”. In other words, for the Turkish state there has always been a difference between “Turks as such” and “constitutional-Turks”. Those who were qualified as constitutional-Turks were non-Muslim citizens and they became subject to discriminatory practices of citizenship. In other words, non-Muslim Turkish citizens have mostly been seen as those inhabitants of Turkey who are not inclined or suitable for assimilation. As such, they have been considered Turkish only in terms of citizenship and not Turkish as such.

This explains how Kurds came to be considered citizens with a potential to be Turkish through assimilation. Because they are Muslims of Anatolia, Kurds have been perceived as prospective-Turks and accordingly they have been invited to Turkishness as such. As I mentioned, quite a many of Kurds have accepted this invitation over the years.

Kurds Today: “the new disloyals”

Today, the picture drawn above is changing. Signs in circulation at the moment signify that the status of Kurds vis-à-vis Turkishness is on the brink of a major change. To put it boldly, the

confidence of the Turkish Republic in the willingness of Kurds to become Turkish is not as firm as it was once. Although it is yet impossible to argue that the Kurds are now perceived outside of the circle of Turkishness, the traditional contention that Kurds are prospective-Turks is now weaker at both public and popular levels.

Beginning in the early 2000's some bizarre signs and symbols began to appear in the Turkish media. In several occasions Kurds were defined as 'crypto-Jews' and 'native-Greeks'. What is common to these symptomatic signs is the connection built between Kurdish people and various elements of non-Muslimhood. When this connection built between Kurds and non-Muslimhood is thought together with the unstable frontiers of Turkishness with respect to Muslimhood and non-Muslimhood distinction it becomes clear what I mean when I argue that the famous motto that "Kurds are "prospective-Turks" is not as strong as it was. Obviously, I am not suggesting that Turkish people now believe that Kurds are in fact not Muslims. Rather, what I am suggesting is that today Kurds are, in the eyes of Turkish masses, *like* the other *non-Muslims* of Anatolia, who have always been perceived as disloyal.

Some recent signs suggest that not only some sections of Turkish society but even the Turkish State is no more a firm follower of the idea that Kurds are prospective-Turks. Of such signs, the notorious one has been the usage of the term "pseudo-citizens" in a statement issued by the Turkish General Staff immediately following the Newroz⁹ demonstrations across Turkey in 2005. Demonstrations in this year were unprecedented in terms of both the intense symbolism used and the size of the crowds gathered. Posters of the captured leader of the PKK, and the Kurdish flag of confederalism, designed by Öcalan for Kurds in the Middle East, were both used extensively during the demonstrations. The intense symbolism in the form of flags and posters present at the demonstrations indicated that a large number of Kurds felt themselves to be alienated from the Turkish political community. In one instance, two Kurdish boys desecrated a Turkish flag during one particular demonstration in Mersin. Immediately following, the General Staff issued a response addressed to the "Great Turkish Nation":

[T]he innocent activities organized in the name of celebrating the coming of spring have been furthered *by a group* [...] to the extent that the Turkish flag, the symbol of the sublime Turkish nation [...], was desecrated. In its long history, the Turkish nation has lived good and old days, betrayals as well as victories. Yet, it has never faced such a treachery committed by its own *pseudo-citizens* in its own homeland. This is treachery. [...] (emphasis added).¹⁰

⁹ A spring festival celebrated by many peoples of the Middle East and Asia.

¹⁰ <http://www.hurriyetim.com.tr/haber/0,,sid~1@w~2@tarih~2005-03-22-m@nvid~553006,00.asp>

This statement was significant in that, for the first time, public authorities in Turkey accused those individuals violating the law of being ‘pseudo-citizens’ versus citizens.

It is important to note that the statement addressed not just the two young perpetrators who desecrated the flag nor the very act of the desecration itself. Rather, addressee of the statement was the unprecedented symbolism of the Newroz demonstrations of 2005. This was immediately realized and acknowledged by a number of people. Gündüz Aktan, a former diplomat and a pro-state columnist in *Radikal* asserted that it would not be correct to reduce the statement in question to a ‘flag incident.’¹¹ In his view, “just as the flag is a symbol, the statement also had its own symbolism.”

The General Staff was not the only public institution to use the term ‘pseudo-citizen’. Several days after the General Staff issued their statement, the Senate of Ankara University issued a declaration condemning “the desecration of Turkish flag [...] by a group of our pseudo-citizens.”¹²

Another recent event also confirms my argument that Kurds’ status in the eyes of the state is at the gate of a fundamental change. On 17 November 2005, warplanes made low-altitude passes over thousands of marching Kurdish citizens meeting for a funeral. The key distinguishing characteristic of this funeral was, again, the degree of symbolism used. ‘Pictures’ of the funeral showed once more that many Kurdish question citizens have lost their sense of belongingness to the Turkish political community. Many demonstrators carried posters of Öcalan and the flag of the PKK. That this deep symbolism of the funeral was not welcomed by the public authorities was shown by another symbolic act: the two warplanes that made four low-altitude passes over the cortege.¹³

The incidences described above leads to the following conclusion: the idea that Kurds are prospective-Kurds is, at both official and popular levels, not as strong as it once was. It is of course impossible to allege that this conviction has been abandoned entirely. Nevertheless, that connections are built between Kurds and various forms of non-Muslimhood and that the term ‘pseudo-citizens’ is used to describe some Kurdish groups suggest that both the official and the popular perceptions of Kurds are now subject to a very fundamental change.

As to why such a change has taken place in the perception of Kurds, the following could be suggested. To begin with, the new millennium illuminated a very plain fact: despite the

¹¹ <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=147472&tarih=24/03/2005>

¹² <http://www.ankara.edu.tr/yazi.php?yad=2802>

¹³ <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=170375;>
<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2005/11/18/guncel/axgun01.html>

Turkish Republic's success in defeating the Kurdish resistance of the 1990's, many Kurdish citizens were still not assimilated into Turkish society, and, moreover, did not want to. Within the last decade, growing political support for pro-Kurdish parties in local and national elections and increasing demonstrations of Kurdish citizens show that many Kurds have been resisting assimilation. Moreover, Kurds resisting assimilation constitute a significant portion of the total population in Turkey and they are settled in a particular region of the country. It is as if there is now a second territorial-linguistic community, a parallel nation, existing side by side its Turkish counterpart in Turkey. This has been a major disappointment for the Turkish Republic, which for so long endeavoured to create a homogenised, mono-linguistic nation from the diverse range of Muslim inhabitants in Anatolia. The 'realization' of the unbearable fact that Kurds are a second national community in Turkey is the main reason for the erosion in the long-standing image of Kurds as prospective-Turks.

Moreover, two recent developments have reinforced the self-confidence of Kurdish citizens of Turkey in resisting assimilation. These were the legal reforms implemented for ensuring Turkey's candidacy for EU membership and the establishment of a federal Kurdish state in Iraq. Both developments have equipped Kurds with new means to emphasize their ethnic distinctiveness.

As Turkey continues in route to EU membership, pursuing a massive policy of Kurdish assimilation, especially one based on forcible means like displacement is increasingly less viable. In fact, the contrary is more likely. As long as Turkey remains a candidate for EU membership, outside demands to remove restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression will continue to increase. As such, Turkey's progress in the process of the EU membership seems to be fortifying the present state of Kurds in Turkey as a second territorial-linguistic community and has thus also worked to fade the meta-image of Kurds as prospective-Turks.

The recent establishment of a federal Kurdish state in northern Iraq has also served to increase the present alienation of Kurds in the Turkish political community. That there is now a (federal) Kurdish state adjunct to the Kurdish provinces of Turkey and the growing cultural and economic ties with the Kurds there seem to have reinforced the self-confidence of Kurdish citizens of Turkey in resisting assimilation. Consequently, what has happened in Iraq in the last few years has also increased Kurdish alienation from the Turkish political community which has, in turn, also weakened the traditional understanding of Kurds as prospective-Turks.

Conclusion

To conclude, the narrative I provided suggests that today, the Turkish public is profoundly hesitant as to whether Kurds in Turkey are loyal and qualified citizens of the Republic or not. Considering the citizenship practices in the past, especially those experienced by non-Muslim citizens of the Republic, one may suspect whether Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin will also be subject to practices of discrimination. It is also reasonable to suspect whether Kurds will also be regarded as Turkish ‘in terms of citizenship’ only. At the moment, it is yet impossible to give a yes or no answer to such questions, chiefly because the traditional image of Kurds as prospective-Turks has not been ruled out yet. In other words, it is yet difficult to argue that the Turkish Republic has entirely lost its confidence in assimilating Kurds.

Yet, on the other hand, the alienation of Kurds from the Turkish political community is still going on and the Turkish state continues to pursue the ideal of a homogenous, monolingual political community within its borders. Under such conditions, it is safe to say that neither of the present two perceptions will vanish in the foreseeable future. It appears that both images, i.e. “Kurds as prospective-Turks” and “Kurds as disloyals or pseudo-citizens” will, for some time, be working together as parallel images.