



## RESEARCH NOTE

### **Resettlement and Reconstruction of Identity: The Case of the Kurds in Turkey**

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#### **Introduction**

In the Republic of Turkey the government has been mired in an increasingly bitter war with the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK). The PKK, formally established in 1978, launched its first offensive military operation in 1984. The PKK's impact was enormous. In the 1990s, the PKK was able to mobilise mass support among the Kurds. The Republic of Turkey was caught unprepared. In an effort to root out the PKK, the government of Turkey used indiscriminate counter-insurgency methods, also targeting the civilian population (Mater 1999; Dicle 1997; Bruinessen 1997; Kaplan 1996; Olson 1996; Amnesty International 1996; Zürcher 1995). State forces hoped to eliminate networks of logistic support for the PKK, among others, by means of forced evacuation and village destruction in Kurdish-populated rural areas.

Forced evacuation and village destruction started at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties and reached its peak in the mid-nineties. Detailed accounts of forced evacuation and village destruction<sup>1</sup> have been made by different NGOs (IHD 1996; SNK 1995; Human Rights Watch 1995). Forced evacuation and village destruction reflected - at least partly - the course of the war between the PKK and the Turkish state. A total of 1,779 villages and hamlets and 6,153 settlements were evacuated or destroyed by Turkish security forces (Turkish Daily News, 31 May 2000). Most of the evacuated villages are now in ruins. Unless constantly maintained, the houses built of clay bricks fall into disrepair. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (Türkiye İnsan hakları Vakfı, TIHV) estimates the number of forced migrants at 3 million, and according to the Peoples Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP), 4 million people are internally displaced (TIHV 2001; Karageci 2000). Zucker (2000: 2) estimates that Turkey is the country with the second largest number of internally displaced persons in the world. During the war between 30,000 and 35,000 people lost their life, most of them Kurdish civilians.

War is not only about killing people and material destruction, but also about the destruction of social institutions and social cohesion in society. 'Mass terror becomes a deliberate strategy. Destruction of schools, houses, religious building, fields and crops as well as torture, rape and internment become commonplace. *Modern warfare is concerned not only to destroy life, but also ways of life.*' (Bracken et al. 1998: 3). In this article, I will argue that this is exactly the case in Turkey. The aim of forced evacuation and resettlement was the destruction of social and cultural cohesion among Kurds and their subsequent assimilation into Turks. I will present historical evidence for my argument and address contemporary re-settlement projects. Before doing that, I will briefly discuss the concept of the nation and nationalism as factor of cohesion in official political thinking in Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1990 and 1992, Turkish armed forces destroyed villages and forced the local population to leave the countryside in Hakkari, Sirnak, Van and Siirt. In 1993, village destruction and forced evacuation of the population became systematic in Bitlis, Diyarbakir and Mardin. In 1994 and 1995, Tunceli and parts of Bingöl, which together constitute Dersim, which is inhabited mainly by Kurds of Alevi origin, were the target of successive military operations aimed at de-populating large parts of the countryside. In 1996, Sivas, an area which is inhabited by both Kurds and Turks, was also affected by village destruction and forced displacement.

### ***Turkey and the Kurds: Ethnonationalism and Authoritarianism***

According to the 1982 constitution written by the Turkish military after the coup on 12 September 1980, Turkey is 'a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law (...) loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk.' The content of the phrase 'loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk' becomes clear from the Preamble of the 1982 constitution: 'No protection shall be given to thoughts and opinions that run counter to Turkish national interests, the fundamental principles of the existence of the indivisibility of the Turkish state and territory, the historical and moral values of Turkishness, or the nationalism, principles, reforms, and modernism of Atatürk, and that as required by the principles of secularism there shall be absolutely no interference of sacred religious feeling in the affair of state and politics.'

The political heritage of Atatürk can be characterised by two elements: an ethnic-nationalist ideology and an authoritarian state. According to the ethnic nationalist ideology developed by Atatürk and İnönü, all citizens of Turkey are Turks. Ever since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, determined efforts have been made to realise a nation-state with a single ethnic identity. İnönü, right hand and successor of Atatürk, expressed the official position: 'We are frankly [n]ationalist[s] ...and [n]ationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. We must turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price, and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or 'le turquisme' (Barkey & Fuller, 1998: 10).

In fact, the words of İnönü are a rather outspoken outline of the character of nation-building in Turkey. Although, according to the founders of the Republic of Turkey, a Turkish ethnic nationalist ideology had to become the fabric of society, the irony is that this ideology is at the same time the main source of political conflict and violence. Not only with the Kurds, around 15 million people in a total population in Turkey of 60 million, but also with other ethnic groups (for example, Armenians, Laz, Rum). The expression of other identities, both ethnic and religious, are considered by the state as a threat to internal security and to the indivisibility of the country. The non-Turks became non-entities in modern Turkey (Barkey & Fuller, 1998: 10).

The second characteristic of the political heritage of Atatürk is an authoritarian state. This is closely related with the politics of enforced ethnicity on the citizens of Turkey. The construction of a single ethnic nation-state in a multi-ethnic region creates the need for a strong central authority that is able to force a single ethnic identity on the citizens of the country.

The 'policy of assimilation and homogeneity has influenced and continues to influence the forms of Kurdish resistance and is a cause of the open use of violence' (Gürbey, 1996: 10). Major uprisings took place in 1925 (Sheikh Said), 1928-1930 (Hoyboun) and 1937-1938 (Dersim) (for a general overview see: Bruinessen 2000: 98) and the 1980s up to now (PKK).

### ***Forced Evacuation and Resettlement in the History of Turkey***

In response to their uprisings, large communities in Kurdistan were dispersed through deportation throughout Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s (Izady 1992: 104). According to Van Bruinessen (2000: 79), '[t]he first deportations were simply reprisals against rebellious tribes. In later years, deportations became part of the concerted effort to assimilate the Kurds.' This is confirmed by official documents disclosed by several authors (Beşikçi 1977; Bayrak 1993, 1994). One of the many official documents



disclosed by Bayrak (1993) is the *İskana Tabi Tutulanların 'Türkleştirilmesi Uygulamasına İlişkin Gizli Genelge'*. This document, dated January 1930, orders the assessment of villages with 'foreign' names and 'foreign' inhabitants and the dispersion of these 'foreigners' over Turkish villages in order to make them Turks: 'Türkleştirilmek'. The document also says that these 'foreigners' are not allowed to establish a new village or neighbourhood (Bayrak 1993: 506-509). This document is not one of a kind, but one out of many. In 1932, a law was passed in Turkish parliament that ordered the deportation and dispersion of Kurds to force their assimilation into 'Turks'. The law said that (cited in Izady 1992: 109):

Four separated categories of inhabited zones will be recognised in Turkey, as will be indicated on a map established by the Minister of Interior and approved by other Ministers.

Zone One will include all those areas in which it is deemed desirable to increase the density of the culturally Turkish population; zone two will include those areas in which it is deemed desirable to establish populations which must be assimilated into Turkish culture; zone three will be territories in which culturally Turkish immigrants will be allowed to establish themselves, freely but without assistance of the authorities; zone four will include all those territories which it has been decided should be evacuated and those which may be closed for public health, material, cultural, political, strategic or security reasons.'

According to Izady (1992: 109), Kurds were dispersed thinly so they could not constitute more than 10 percent of the population of any district to which they were deported. According to Bedirxan (1997), the law dictated that the deported non-Turkish population was not allowed to settle in villages. In towns and cities, they must not constitute more than 10 per cent of the population (1997: 21). According to accounts of survivors of the Dersim rebellion and its aftermath, families were dispersed over different places in western Turkey. To break up the Kurds' social cohesion, they were not allowed to have contact with each other (Jongerden 1997: 56). It was even suggested that Kurdish children be sent to boarding schools where they would speak exclusively in Turkish (Gunter 1997: 6). Lack of state resources and the size of the Kurdish population, however, prevented these plans from being implemented.

### ***Forced Evacuation and Resettlement in Contemporary Turkey***

After the capture of PKK leader Öcalan in 1999 and after military activities within the borders of Turkey almost came to a halt, the issue of reconstructing the evacuated and destroyed villages rose on the political agenda. In only a couple of months HADEP collected the names of 30,000 families who wanted to return to their villages. The migrant organisation Göç-Der also received applications of 20,000 families (Kurdish Observer, 30 July 2000).

In the course of the year 2000, residents of four villages in the Berwar region of Hakkari returned to the villages of Simuinis, Kutranis, Sevan and Ilik, which had all been evacuated in 1994. The villagers returned with temporary permission of both the government and military officials (Kurdish Observer, 30 July 2000). However, permission to return is more the exception than the rule. In many cases, the authorities, often represented by the military, turned down applications.<sup>2</sup> Village 're-destruction' also takes

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<sup>2</sup> Application to return to villages near Lice, Kulp, Silvan and Dicle were turned down by the authorities, represented by the District Battalion Command. Villagers from Hiskani in the Silab district were first told they could return, but Bagdere police later informed the villagers that the permission had been cancelled (Kurdish Observer, 20 June 2000)

place, for example of the village of Akcapinar near Kozluk, Batman, which was originally destroyed in 1993. The villagers returned to their village in May 2000. After the harvest, they started to build permanent houses for the winter. In October 2000, however, the army came back and 'herded the villagers together, trampled their gardens and torched their belongings, including tents and one recently finished house' (Washington Post, 8 November 2000). TIHV concludes the government, instead of meeting their own obligations toward the internally displaced people, are an obstacle to a solution of the problem (TIHV 2001). There are not only problems directly deriving from the state of emergency and village re-destruction, but some others also arise from the paramilitary village guard system. Many village guards confiscated the land of villagers. In order not to lose that land, these village-guards try to prevent people from returning (TIHV 2001: 8). In the near future, 'Europe' will become involved in the issue, not only because Turkey asked the European Union to co-finance the village-town project, but also because 23 villagers from Dolapdere and Ergeçet near Silvan have submitted a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg: the authorities did not allow the villagers to return to their villages, which the latter consider as a violation of their human rights (2000de Yeni Gündem, 9 February 2001; TIHV 2001).

The authorities do not favour reconstruction of the old villages.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the Turkish government clings to the concept of the village-town. The idea of village-towns was first brought up in the beginning of the 1970s by the Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP). The party made it an election issue (CHP 1973). CHP considered concentration of human settlement in so called village-towns as a prerequisite for the modernisation of agriculture, employment and social services. The first pilot projects had to be implemented in Van and Urfa, both in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Migration from, among others, Antalya, Mardin and Hatay to Van and Urfa was part of the plan (Köyisleri ve Kooperatifler Bakanlığı 1978). Both pilot projects, however, were never implemented. It is not clear what the differences are between the 'old' village town concept of the seventies and the 'new' village-town concept of the nineties.

Prime Minister Ecevit, who already served as prime minister of Turkey in the late 1970s, still considers the village-town project as a policy instrument to urbanise and modernise the countryside, but also praises it as a counter-insurgency instrument (Turkish Daily News, 4 September 2000). On another occasion he stated that the village-towns are 'advantageous from the point of view of security and progress' and 'make the values of civilisation' available, also linking 'modernisation' and 'counter-insurgency' (Ecevit, cited in Kurdish Observer, 18 January 2000). Modernisation, however, is a problematic concept, often associated with processes of assimilation or control by state bureaucracies. Economic development (or modernisation), characterised by technological advances, commercialisation of agriculture, industrialisation and urbanisation, is assumed to be accompanied by social and political integration. It denotes the move from a 'pre-modern' political structure, where political integration is bound up with kinship status or tribal membership, to a 'modern' type characterised by political parties and state bureaucracy (Long 1977: 10-11). Thus, the authorities presented the military operations in Dersim in 1937 and 1938 and the deportations that followed as a struggle of modernity against backwardness (Van Bruinessen 2000: 77).

Up to now, different village-town projects have been implemented: Cavdar at the Black Sea coast, Konalga in Van's Catak district, Islamkoy in Diyarbakir's Kulp district, Basagac near Siirt and Bayrakli near Erüh (Turkish Daily News, 4 September 2000; Kurdish Observer, 22 April 2000; Reuters, 27 September 2000; TIHV 2001: 8). It is reported

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<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Ecevit stated at the opening of Basagac village-town: 'The old villages will not be rebuilt, a new life will begin here' (Reuters, 27 September 2000).



that Konalga village-town in Van stayed empty for several months until village guards moved in (TIHV 2001: 8). In the case of Konalga village-town, it has also been suggested that villagers were forced by both police and tribal leaders to settle there (Turkish Daily News, 4 September 2000). The construction of Basagac village-town - 106 houses, a health clinic and a primary school - has cost US\$1 million (Reuters, 27 September 2000). Three months after completion, only 13 families had moved in (TIHV 2001: 8).

In Hakkari, a village-town is planned for the Uzumlu village in the district of Cukurca alongside another one, Ikiyaka, in Yuksekova (Kurdish Observer, 22 April 2000). In the summer of 2000, military commanders in Lice and Kulp held a meeting with about 100 *muhtars* (mayors) of evacuated villages to gain support for the building of village-towns. But it would seem as though the proposal made by the army officers was rejected by the *muhtars*, who explained that they wanted to return to their own villages (Kurdish Observer, 20 June 2000).

Among both villagers and aghas, there is opposition against the village-towns. The aghas are not willing to give up their land for the village-towns. Villagers seem to reject the very idea of village-towns that are constructed according to urban plans, because they do not have possibilities to keep animals and garden plots. According to Göç-Der chairman Mahmut Özgür both the 400 houses in Konalga and the 300 houses in Islamkoy village-towns are constructed with one police station for every 100 households while suitable places for production or sheltering animals are lacking. The only employment available is reported to be as village guard (Kurdish Observer, 22 April 2000).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Reconstruction and resettlement of forced migrants is not merely a material process. Material reconstruction also implies the reconstruction of social cohesion. In this article, I have argued that Turkey historically used forced evacuation and forced resettlement as instruments for the assimilation of Kurds. The aim of these concerted efforts on the part of the Turkish state were the creation of an ethnically homogenous society. The 'Turkishness' of the civilians was thought to be the basis of social cohesion of society and state. I have also addressed the issue of the village-towns. Key-concepts of the village-town approach are 'modernisation' and 'security'. Modernisation, however, is a complicated concept, in social theory often associated with processes of the disintegration of traditional networks and integration in state bureaucracies. My hypothesis is that, on a more general level, the village-town approach assumes modernisation as a process that will be accompanied by social integration (assimilation), and by replacing local (Kurdish) bonds with national (Turkish, state bureaucracy) bonds. In the short term, evidence suggests that the village-town approach is primarily a security-based and -focused concept.

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