

The Land of Many Crossroads

The Kurdish Question in Turkish Politics

by Svante E. Cornell

In November 1998, Turkey's Kurdish question returned to the top of the international agenda with the seizure in Italy of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the rebellious Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan—PKK). Demonstrations in support of Öcalan's release wreaked havoc throughout Europe and served as a reminder of the war between the PKK and the Turkish state that has claimed over 30,000 lives since 1984. A month before his seizure, Öcalan had been expelled from Damascus, his base for the last nineteen years, after Turkey had threatened Syria with war unless it ceased to provide a safe haven for the PKK. Having failed to find asylum in Russia, Belgium, or the Netherlands, Öcalan—apparently acting on an invitation from Italian leftists—believed he could find refuge in Italy. After heavy Turkish and American pressure, Öcalan was nevertheless forced to leave Italy and seek asylum elsewhere, but was eventually apprehended by Turkish security forces on February 16, 1999, in Nairobi, Kenya.

The Kurdish question is arguably the most serious internal problem in the Turkish republic's seventy-seven-year history and certainly the main obstacle to its aspirations to full integration with European institutions. Most Westerners define the problem simply as a matter of oppression and denial of rights by a majority group (the Turks) of an ethnic minority (the Kurds). The civil war in southeastern Turkey that raged between 1984 and 1999 is accordingly viewed as a national liberation movement and enjoys widespread sympathy both in the West and in the Third World. The Turkish political elite, for its part, promotes an entirely different view of the problem, which is often misunderstood and ridiculed in the West. In official Turkish discourse, there is no Kurdish problem, but rather a socioeconomic problem in the southeastern region and a problem of terrorism that is dependent on

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external support from foreign states aiming at weakening Turkey. In reality, neither the official Turkish view nor the dominant Western perception holds up to close scrutiny. A deeper study of the problem reveals its extreme complexity, with a number of facets and dimensions that tend to obscure the essentials of the conflict.

One observation that should be made at the outset is that the Kurdish issue in Turkey differs in many respects from such recent ethnic conflicts as those in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Rwanda. Despite almost two decades of armed conflict and thousands of casualties, open tensions in society between Turks and Kurds remain, under the circumstances, minimal. Foreigners are startled by the discovery that a significant portion of Turkey's political and business elite is of Kurdish origin, including three of the country's nine presidents—something unthinkable for Kosovars or Chechens—and that Kurds' representation in the country's parliament is larger than their proportion of the population.¹ At the same time, it is difficult to refute the assertion that there is an ethnic dimension of the conflict, in the sense that a portion of the country's population holds on to an identity distinct from that of the majority and feels discriminated against on the basis of that identity, resulting in at least a limited ethnic mobilization. In addition to the irrefutable ethnic aspect, the Kurdish problem contains oft-neglected social, economic, political, ideological, and international dimensions that have carried different weight at different times.

Several points need to be understood with regard to the origins and future prospects of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. A thorough grasp of the problem requires, first, an understanding of the national conception underlying the Turkish state and society. Secondly, it must take into account the social (and not only ethnic) distinctiveness of the Kurds and their relationship with the republic's leadership. Thirdly, the Kurdish problem in Turkey must be understood as distinct from the problem of PKK terrorism. Finally, the Kurdish question must be understood within the analysis of the general process of democratization in Turkey.

The National Conception of the Turkish Republic

The Turkish republic is the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, which dissolved during the First World War after more than a century of decay. However, the republic is a dramatically different construct from its predecessor. The Ottoman Empire was an authoritarian monarchy with a religious foundation derived from the sultan's claim that he was also the caliph, the spiritual head of all Muslims of the world. The empire recognized minorities and accorded them extensive self-rule, but it defined minorities in

¹ Based on estimates, given that the ethnicity of members of parliament is not published, and that census data do not include ethnicity.

religious terms. Hence, no Muslim people was ever accorded minority rights, while Jews and Christian Armenians, Serbs, Greeks, and others were. Before the twentieth century, this approach posed few problems, especially given that the Muslim peoples in the empire developed national identities considerably later than the empire's Christian subjects in the Balkans, and did so at least partly as a result of the latter's emerging national awareness. Collective identities were based primarily on religion—Islam at the broadest level and various religious orders and sects at the local level—and regional or clan-based units.

The Turkish republic, by contrast, was modeled upon the nation-states of Western Europe, particularly France. It was guided by six “arrows” or principles enunciated by its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: republicanism, nationalism, secularism, populism, *étatisme*, and reformism. Among these, the first three principles form the foundations of the republic. Although Turkey was no democracy in Atatürk's lifetime, the principles of republicanism and populism suggest the goal of popular rule, that is, a democratic political system.² In the speeches and writings of Atatürk, republicanism unmistakably meant a break with the monarchy of the past.³ The second pillar, secularism, entailed a break with the Islamic character of the state. Although religion was to be kept out of political life, however, this is not to imply that Kemalist Turkey was in any way atheistic. Indeed, as Dogu Ergil has noted, Atatürk's highest goal in the religious field was the translation of the Quran into Turkish. In fact, the aim of the new regime was twofold: to dissociate the state from religious principles, and to “teach religion in Turkish to a people who had been practicing Islam without understanding it for centuries.”⁴ The regime's policies, most blatantly the abolition of the caliphate, nevertheless enraged the more religious parts of the population. This included the Kurds, who have been described as being at that time “a feudal people . . . of extreme religious beliefs.”⁵ Indeed, the Kurdish population was ruled by local hereditary chieftains whose power often stemmed from the backing of the Naqshbandi or Qadiri religious orders.

The founding principle most relevant to the Kurdish question, however, is nationalism. The new state was based on Turkish nationalism, but the territory comprising the republic was a highly multiethnic area even before the large migrations that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶ As the Ottoman Empire was retreating from the Balkans, large

² Populism (*balkçilik*) carries the meaning of a “government for the people” rather than the present-day meaning of the term, used to define political opportunism.

³ For Atatürk's ideas, see e.g. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayinlari, 1980). *Nutuk* is the Great Six-Day Speech held by Atatürk on October 15–20, 1927.

⁴ Dogu Ergil, *Secularism in Turkey: Past and Present* (Ankara: Foreign Policy Institute, 1988), p. 61.

⁵ Patrick Kinross, *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation* (London: Weidenfeld, 1964), p. 397.

⁶ Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1995).

numbers of Muslims, predominantly Slavic by ethnicity, fled to the heartland of the empire, the present-day Turkish republic. In addition, the Russian suppression of Muslim highlanders' resistance in the North Caucasus in the 1850s forced additional hundreds of thousands of people to migrate to Anatolia. As a result, when the Turkish republic was created in 1923, a large proportion of its population consisted of recent immigrants of Slavic, Albanian, Greek, Circassian, Abkhaz, and Chechen origin, whereas people that could claim descent from the Turkic tribes that had come from Central Asia were certainly a minority of Anatolia's population. It was in this complex setting that Atatürk and his associates aimed to create a modern nation-state, an integrated, unitary polity of the French type. For that reason, the model of the nation that Atatürk and his associates adopted was civic, as expressed by the maxim that lies at the basis of Turkish identity: "*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene,*" best translated as "Happy is whoever *says* 'I am a Turk'"—not whoever *is* a Turk. To be a Turk meant to live within the boundaries of the republic and thereby be its citizen. The very use of the word *Türk*, moreover, was a breakthrough, since it had been a derogatory term during Ottoman times, referring to the peasants of the Anatolian countryside. Thus, the word *Türk* defined a new national community into which individuals, irrespective of ethnicity, would be able to integrate. Language reform and the introduction of the Latin alphabet added to the novel character of the nation. It is against this background that every person living within the borders of the republic and accepting its basic principles was welcome to be its citizen. Immigrants to Anatolia of Caucasian or Slavic origin and indigenous populations of Kurdish, Laz, or Arabic origin all became Turks in their own right, whereas ethnically Turkish minorities outside the boundaries of the republic, in the Middle East or the Balkans, were disqualified from membership in the national community. But whereas the Turkish national conception was benign compared with the fascist ones triumphing in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming a Turk entailed the suppression of an individual's own ethnic identity. In other words, Atatürk's maxim was generous in allowing everyone who desired to do so to become a Turkish citizen, but it did not provide a solution for those who were not prepared to abandon their previous identities in favor of the new national idea. This, in a nutshell, was the problem of a significant portion of the Kurdish population, which differed from the rest of the population not only because of language, but also because of its clan-based feudal social structure.

In retrospect, Atatürk's nation-building project appears to have been largely successful. Out of the melting pot of the 1920s has emerged a society in which an overwhelming majority of individuals feel a strong and primary allegiance to a Turkish identity. The only group that has escaped this process seems to have been the Kurds, though by no means all of them. In fact, a great number of Kurds, especially those that willingly or forcibly migrated to western Turkey, integrated successfully into Turkish society and adopted the

language, values, and social organization of the republic. Kurds today are active in all spheres of social and political life, and are even present in the ranks of the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—MHP), which is often characterized in the West as fascist and anti-Kurdish. This remarkable level of assimilation can be attributed in part to the policies of the state, but clearly the ethno-linguistic heterogeneity of the Kurdish population was an additional factor.

It remains a fact, however, that the Kurds are the one ethnic group that to a large degree has retained a distinct identity. There are several reasons for this, of which a major one is demography. The Kurds are by far the largest non-Turkish-speaking group in the country. A second reason is geography: the Kurds were settled in a single area of the country that is distant from the administrative center and inaccessible because of its topography. Thirdly, the Kurds differed from other large groups such as Slavs or Caucasians in that they were an indigenous group and not comparatively recent migrants. Uprooted immigrant populations that have suffered severe upheavals and hardships are significantly more likely to embrace a new national identity than are indigenous groups. Fourthly, the Kurds, unlike other populations, were organized according to a tribal and feudal social structure, a factor that remains crucial to this day. Paradoxically, the Turkish nation-building project (with its one major exception) has been so successful that it is doubtful that state policies can still be described as seeking integration rather than assimilation. As the Turkish identity has strengthened and previous identities vanished or receded, Turkish identity itself has become more homogeneous; as such it carries the risk of growing less civic and more ethnic in nature.

The Distinctiveness of Kurdish Society

The Kurds are not a homogeneous ethnic group and evince differences in religion, language, and ways of life. In Turkey, the clear majority of the perhaps 12 million people that are referred to as Kurds are Sunni Muslims and speak Kurmandji. Nevertheless, some Kurdish groups speak Zaza, which is not mutually intelligible with Kurmandji, or adhere to the Alevi faith, a heterodox branch of Islam with strong non-Islamic features. Moreover, these groups overlap, especially in the Tunceli and Bingöl areas of Turkey, where most Kurds are both Zaza-speaking and Alevi. Hence there are important divisions among Kurds, a fact emphasized by most analysts as an important reason for their lack of political unity.⁷ Even among Sunni Kurds, adherence to different religious orders (*tariqat*) has been a divisive factor. A more important element of the problem is Kurdish social organization, which has

⁷ For a useful introduction, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 1–18.

traditionally been, and essentially remains, tribal and feudal. The tribes, usually referred to as *ashiret* in Turkey, are “fluid, mutable, territorially oriented and at least quasi-kinship groups” that range in size between tribal confederacies of thousands of members to small units of several dozen individuals.⁸ At the head of a tribe is an agha, the leader of a ruling family, who seeks to—and often does—command absolute loyalty from the members of the tribe. Tribes are often, but not always, held together by kinship ideology: an underlying myth of common ancestry, at times going back to a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, has been a strong source of legitimacy keeping the tribe together. Numerous shaykhs, or leaders of the religious orders, have also been tribal aghas, thereby exercising dual authority over their followers. Practically speaking, some tribes have nevertheless been no more than what McDowall calls “a ruling family that has attracted a very large number of clients.”⁹ During Ottoman times, the state used tribal leaders as a means to exert territorial control over Kurdish areas. Those that sided with the Ottomans in their wars with Persia were rewarded with the recognition of their autonomous rule over essentially semi-independent principalities, in return for which they paid an annual levy and pledged military support for the empire in times of war. A number of tribal leaders received the title of emir through such agreements.¹⁰ But whereas tribal leaders were co-opted by the state, shaykhs and aghas also led rebellions against the state. However, the very fact of these rebellions’ tribal rather than national nature led to a lack of cohesion vis-à-vis the state. When one tribal leader revolted, for example, others saw it fit to collaborate with the state to quell the rebellion. As Gérard Chaliand notes, perpetual competition was the hallmark of relations between tribes: “Allegiances can . . . fluctuate, but division itself . . . remains a constant.”¹¹

Moreover, the relationship between a tribal society and the state is by no means easy. As displayed not only in Kurdish-populated areas but also in places such as Afghanistan and Chechnya, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the tribal hierarchy and the modern nation-state. Tribal leaders “act as arbitrators of disputes and allocators of resources, benefits and duties . . . [and] jealously guard [their] monopoly of all relations with the outside world.”¹² A centralized state is a direct threat to tribal leaders’ authority because by definition it seeks to exercise direct control over all citizens. There are two basic ways for a state to exercise control over predominantly tribal areas: either to break down the tribal structures and integrate the population into the social structures of the state, or to co-opt

⁸ See, for example, Jack David Eller, *From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 149–51.

⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁰ See Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (Utrecht: Rijswijk, 1978).

¹¹ Gérard Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy*, trans. Philip Black (London: Zed Books, 1994).

¹² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 15.

tribal leaders and use them as instruments of power in the tribal areas. Most states facing this dilemma have employed a mixture of these two strategies, often playing tribal leaders against one another. Needless to say, the strategy of breaking down tribal structures risks provoking armed resistance on the part of the tribal leaders, and so the Turkish republic, much like the Ottoman Empire before it, adopted a strategy of co-optation. Among the numerous members of parliament from the predominantly Kurdish southeast, many if not most belong to families of feudal lords or are endorsed by them. This is especially the case for the rightist parties with an origin in the now-defunct Democratic Party (Demokrat Partisi—DP).¹³ In the southeast, where it is not uncommon to find up to 80 percent electoral support for a given political party in one province and equally strong backing for a different party in a neighboring province, such curious parliamentary election results should be interpreted with that history in mind.¹⁴ A tribal leader's endorsement of one party is likely to ensure the votes of an overwhelming majority of tribal members. It is small wonder, then, that the political leaders in Ankara have resorted to the policy of co-optation, which not only is much safer than trying forcibly to break down tribal structures, but also carries the distinct advantage of winning large numbers of votes without significant campaigning. Turkish governments until the 1990s therefore had little incentive to integrate south-eastern Anatolia socially with the rest of the country.¹⁵

Whereas this strategy has been beneficial both for Ankara and the tribal leaders, it has been less so for the Kurdish population as a whole. The Kurdish areas have consistently lagged behind the rest of Turkey in terms of economic development, due largely to the preservation of the tribal structures and the neglect of the central government. Tribal leaders, of course, have an interest in preventing rapid modernization, which would inevitably weaken the traditional social structures that perpetuate their power. As a result, they have in all likelihood encouraged a certain lack of attention to their region on the part of central authorities. This is not to say that the rapid development of Turkish society has wholly bypassed the Kurds. Although the government may have neglected the area, considerable development has taken place, especially through the introduction of nationally standardized educational norms and compulsory military service, and through the spread of mass media, which have all brought dramatic changes to the perceptual environment of a generation of Kurds. In addition, as noted above, numerous Kurds have migrated to urban areas in western Turkey. Some of them left the

¹³ The present-day center-right True Path Party (Dogru Yol Partisi—DYP), Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi—ANAP), Welfare Party (Refah Partisi—RP), Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi—FP), and Nationalist Movement Party all originate from the DP, which existed from 1950 to 1960.

¹⁴ For the 1995 elections, see Harald Schüler, "Parlamentswahlen in der Türkei" (Parliamentary elections in Turkey), *Orient*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1996).

¹⁵ See Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges, Opportunities, Threats* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), p. 101.

southeast in search of better economic conditions and others were relocated by the state in an effort to integrate Kurds into society, but in both cases the result was to expose thousands of young Kurds to previously alien ways of living and thinking. In this context, leftist ideologies have had a specific attraction to many of the Kurds who have studied in Turkish universities since the 1960s.

The Militant PKK

Kurdish rebellions before World War II had a strong tribal and religious character that often overshadowed the national component, but in the postwar period this pattern underwent significant change. Turkey held its first multiparty election in 1950, resulting in the electoral defeat of Atatürk's Republican People's Party and a transfer of power to the center-right DP. The new government allowed exiled shaykhs and aghas to return, co-opting them into the system as outlined above.¹⁶ The strengthened position of tribal leaders gave further impetus to the migration of Kurds to the urban areas of western Turkey, where a number of them benefited from the increasingly market-oriented economic policies of the government. Within a short time, a movement called "Eastism" (*Doguculuk*) emerged, advocating economic development efforts in eastern and southeastern Anatolia. After the military coup of 1960, a new and more liberal constitution was adopted that included substantial protections for democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights. Indeed, the 1961 constitution (which was superseded in 1982) was the most liberal that Turkey has ever had. These freedoms led to a mushrooming of leftist activity among Kurds and others in Turkey. Although more-radical groups with various Marxist-Leninist affiliations emerged, the most prominent was the Workers' Party, whose public statements calling attention to an oppressed Kurdish minority eventually led to its closure.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the increasing stature of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in northern Iraq and the rise of Kurdish nationalism there had a profound effect on more right-wing Kurdish activities in Turkey. From the 1960s onward, therefore, one can speak of a clear ideological division among politically active Kurds. A Marxist wing cooperated with ideological brethren of Turkish origin and often formed parts of Turkish-dominated groups, while a more traditionally nationalistic wing identified closely with Barzani's KDP. A main item on the agenda of the leftist Kurds was the socioeconomic restructuring of the southeast into a more equitable society through the dismantling of tribal institutions and, in its more extreme versions, the creation of a socialist system. This agenda was naturally anathema to the

¹⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, pp. 396–400.

¹⁷ See Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 90. The Workers' Party is unrelated to the PKK.

right-wing groups, which were closely linked to the tribal hierarchy. The right-wing Kurdish nationalists nevertheless failed to prevail for two main reasons: internal tribal divisions among them weakened their strength and appeal, and both their main leaders were forced into exile after the 1971 military intervention and eventually assassinated in northern Iraq. During the 1970s, leftist radicalization intensified as migration to urban areas of western Turkey continued and enrollment in higher education increased. These parallel processes heightened awareness of economic and political disparities between the southeast and the rest of the country, and Kurds were socio-economically predisposed to be absorbed into the leftist climate predominant among the student body in Turkish universities. Gradually, however, Kurdish leftists became alienated from their Turkish colleagues and formed separate political movements.

Having its origins in an informal grouping around Abdullah Öcalan dating back to 1973, the PKK was formally established as a Marxist-Leninist Kurdish political party in 1978 and advocated the creation of a Marxist Kurdish state. From the outset, the PKK defined Kurdish tribal society as a main target of the revolutionary struggle. It described Kurdistan as an area under colonial rule, where tribal leaders and a *comprador* bourgeoisie colluded to help the state exploit the lower classes. In particular, it advocated a revolution to “clear away the contradictions in society left over from the Middle Ages,” including feudalism, tribalism, and religious sectarianism.¹⁸ It should be noted that in the 1990s the PKK toned down its Marxist rhetoric and instead emphasized Kurdish nationalism in the hopes of attracting a larger following among Turkish Kurds. Marxism-Leninism found little resonance among the population in agricultural, rural southeastern Turkey.

The PKK suffered heavily from the 1980 military coup, and Öcalan and some associates fled Turkey for Syria and the Bekaa Valley of northern Lebanon. But the repression of other leftist and Kurdish movements allowed the PKK to emerge as the sole credible Kurdish challenger to the state, and with the start of military operations in 1984, the PKK left Turkish Kurds with few choices. Unless they decided to stay out of politics completely, Kurds were forced either to side with the state, thereby expanding their opportunities as Turkish citizens at the price of suppressing their ethnic identity, or else join the PKK and fight the state. Any option ranging between these two extremes became highly dangerous, since any form of *peaceful* advocacy of Kurdish rights would attract the wrath of both the state and the PKK. The Turkish state painted itself into a corner by equating virtually all expressions of Kurdish identity with PKK terrorism. The PKK, in turn, suffered from several drawbacks that would ultimately precipitate its demise. Most signifi-

¹⁸ See Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), p. 60. For details on the PKK's ideology and tactics, see Michael Radu's article, “The Rise and Fall of the PKK,” in this issue of *Orbis*.

cantly, its violence against the very population it claimed to represent disillusioned many Kurds, who saw little difference between the repressive Turkish state organs and a repressive PKK. To this should be added the megalomania that has been attributed to Öcalan. Beyond disallowing intra-party opposition, Öcalan developed a true personality cult around himself, leading other Kurdish leaders to abandon him as a madman. Jalal Talabani, the leader of the northern Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), stated that “Öcalan is possessed by a *folie de grandeur* . . . he is a madman, like a dog looking for a piece of meat.” The other Iraqi Kurdish leader, Masoud Barzani of the KDP, compared him to the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin.¹⁹ Thirdly, the PKK’s Marxist-Leninist ideology, which never really commanded much enthusiasm in Kurdish society at the outset, became a liability after the collapse of communism worldwide. Fourthly, despite its ideological zeal, the PKK failed to stay out of the tribal politics it aimed to destroy. In light of the authority commanded by tribal leaders, the PKK was forced to negotiate with the aghas, since winning over a tribal leader meant winning the support of the whole tribe, an advantage the PKK could not afford to forgo. As a result, the PKK had a stake in preserving tribal structures.²⁰ A fifth source of weakness derived from the westward migrations that were partly a result of

Most Kurds do not desire a separate Kurdish state.

the war. By the mid-1990s only a minority of Turkey’s Kurds actually lived in the southeast. The sixth and final flaw was that the prospect of a separate Kurdish state did not enjoy the support of a majority of Kurds. The failure of the Kurdish “Federated State” in northern Iraq in the early 1990s, which culminated in economic misery and factional infighting, heightened the appeal of remaining within Turkey, especially

as Turkish attempts to gain membership in the European Union were likely to bring increased democratization and economic development.

The longevity and intensity of the PKK rebellion are partly explained by the party’s organizational skills and the support it managed to muster as a result of dissatisfaction among Kurds in Turkey. Of equal or greater importance, however, has been the PKK’s mobilization of international resources, which can be divided into three basic categories: support from Kurds in exile, primarily in Western Europe; financial resources stemming from the narcotics trade; and indirect and direct support from states with an interest in weakening Turkey. Reliable PKK support has come from the Kurdish communities in Western Europe, especially Germany and, to a lesser degree, Sweden, where it has commanded the loyalty of a majority of exiled Kurds. This is not surprising, given that Kurds in exile include large numbers of politically motivated migrants, and given that the political mobilization of Kurds in

¹⁹ See Nicole and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled* (New York: Overlook Press, 1998), p. 261.

²⁰ İsmet G. İmset, *PKK: Ayrılıkçı Sıddetin 20 Yılı* (The PKK: Twenty years of separatist terror) (Ankara: TDN, 1992).

Europe, including the (sometimes forced) levy of “taxes,” is considerably easier than in Turkey, where state restrictions are far more stringent.²¹ As concerns the drug trade, significant circumstantial evidence suggests that the PKK derives a large part of its financing from the production, refining, and smuggling of illicit narcotics to Europe, although the importance of the drug factor in the PKK rebellion should not be overestimated.²²

Unquestionably, the most important factor in the PKK’s survival has been the support of several foreign countries. During the 1980s the PKK was funded mainly by its ideological brethren in the Soviet Union. Evidence that other states supported or tolerated its operations on their soil has also surfaced, notably Greece, Iran, and Greek Cyprus. The PKK’s most crucial and stable ally, however, has been Syria, which hosted Öcalan for twenty years and provided training facilities in the Bekaa Valley of Syrian-controlled northern Lebanon. Syria’s reasons for opposing Turkey are manifold.²³ Most fundamental is a border dispute over the Hatay province, which is claimed by Syria but was ceded to Turkey by France (Syria’s League of Nations mandatory) in 1939. Furthermore, Turkey’s economic development program for southeastern Anatolia, which was inaugurated in the 1980s, planned to use water from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers to irrigate large tracts of the arid region. Syria, fearing this would jeopardize its own access to water from the Euphrates, increased its support not only for the PKK, but also for Armenian terrorist organizations targeting Turkey.²⁴ Syria’s role as the PKK’s main patron became increasingly evident as the Soviet Union dissolved. Although Russia has utilized the PKK as a lever against Turkey, especially to deter possible Turkish support for Chechen insurgents, Russian support in no way approaches that which the Soviet Union provided in the 1980s.²⁵ It is doubtful whether the PKK could have attained anything close to the position it did without foreign support.

Whereas the end of the Cold War entailed a series of problems for the PKK, the Persian Gulf War was highly beneficial. The coalition against Iraq and Operation Provide Comfort for all practical purposes removed northern Iraq from Baghdad’s jurisdiction, and a U.S.-backed Kurdish “Federated State” was created there. At the heart of this new entity was a power-sharing agreement between Barzani’s KDP and Talabani’s PUK, an arrangement achieved partly through the efforts of the Turkish government, which stepped

²¹ Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), p. 30.

²² Nimet Beriker-Atiyas, “The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Issues, Parties, Prospects,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1997), p. 440; Nur Bilge Criss, “The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1995), pp. 17–38.

²³ See Süha Bölükbaşı, “Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad, and the Regionalization of Turkey’s Kurdish Secessionism,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Summer 1991, pp. 15–36.

²⁴ See Philip Robins, *Turkey and the Middle East* (London: Pinter/RIIA, 1991), p. 50.

²⁵ Robert Olson, “The Kurdish Question and Chechnya: Turkish and Russian Foreign Policies since the Gulf War,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1996), pp. 106–18.

in as a patron of the deal in order to keep the PKK out of the area. However, conflicts between the KDP and PUK prevented the scheme from being implemented, and northern Iraq became a power vacuum, which coincided nicely with the aims of the PKK. Öcalan's organization soon based its operations there, and by 1994 it had managed to deny the Turkish state effective control of large tracts of its southeastern territory.²⁶ At the same time, the Turkish army's demonstrable lack of preparation for mountain and guerilla warfare undermined discipline in the ranks. As soldiers continually failed to differentiate between civilians and rebels, the PKK enjoyed increasing popular support.

But the situation began to change in the mid-1990s. The Turkish army, having apparently realized the importance of not alienating the civilian population, emphasized discipline within the ranks and initiated a public-relations campaign that included the introduction of health and educational facilities for the population of the southeast. Meanwhile, the Turkish military eventually adapted successfully to guerrilla warfare (in stark contrast to the disastrous performance of the Russian army in Chechnya at roughly the same time) and gathered enough strength to strike the problem at its roots in northern Iraq. Since 1995, regular and massive troop incursions (some involving up to 35,000 troops) and the establishment of a security zone reminiscent of the Israeli zone in southern Lebanon have caused the PKK's position in northern Iraq to wither away. By 1998 the PKK's only lifeline was Syria. Spurred by its alliance with Israel, the Turkish government felt strong enough to threaten Syria with war unless it expelled Öcalan and the PKK bases in the Beka'a Valley. Unable to rule out the prospect of Israel's joining a Turkish punitive expedition, Damascus complied and expelled Öcalan in October 1998. After the PKK's forces relocated to northern Iraq, a subsequent Turkish incursion dealt a severe blow to their military capabilities. Since Öcalan's capture, his unreserved submission to Turkish authorities seems to have damaged the PKK so seriously that it is doubtful that it will ever again become a credible actor.

In sum, the PKK's intrinsic weaknesses that shrank its base of popular support, the Turkish military's change of policy toward the civilian population, and especially Turkey's growing ability to crush the insurgents and stamp out its sources of foreign support combined to defeat the insurgency. In late 1999 the PKK declared its withdrawal from Turkish territory and in early 2000 publicly laid down its arms, apparently emulating the PLO by trying to gain recognition as a political movement instead.

²⁶ See Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), pp. 161–67.

The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Democratization

Having defeated the PKK, Turkey has still not resolved its Kurdish question, since the PKK never represented the opinions of a majority of Turkey's Kurds. Although few reliable sources are available on Kurdish attitudes, there is conclusive evidence that only a minority of Kurds see the PKK as their main representative organ and that the majority desires to remain within the Turkish state. In the PKK's heyday in 1992, a poll conducted in the southeast showed that only 29 percent of the population viewed the PKK as the best representative of the Kurdish people.²⁷ Moreover, a great part of the Kurdish population has taken on Turkish identity in whole or in part. Indeed, Kurds in Turkey have three options: to reject Turkish identity altogether, to accept it in its civic version while retaining their Kurdish ethnic identity (which amounts to integration), or to accept Turkish identity in both its civic and ethnic forms (which amounts to assimilation). A 1993 poll showed that over 13 percent of Istanbul's population claimed Kurdish roots, while 3.9 percent considered themselves Kurds, and 3.7 percent identified themselves as "Turks with Kurdish parents." Apparently, the remainder considered themselves simply "Turks." Even accounting for the less-than-ideal polling conditions at the height of the conflict (including state restrictions on expressions of Kurdish identity), this outcome clearly shows that a significant number of Kurdish people have integrated into Turkish society.

That said, these figures should not be taken as evidence corroborating the view that Turkey does not have a Kurdish problem. Clearly, a large portion of the Kurdish population feels a significant frustration at the state-imposed restrictions on cultural and other rights. However, these figures do show that any solutions based on autonomy or federalism, which have often been advocated by outsiders, are obsolete. Since a majority of Kurds live in western parts of Turkey or are otherwise integrated into Turkish society, autonomy and federalism are impractical alternatives. Moreover, despite the bitterness of the armed conflict, tensions on the grassroots level between Turks and Kurds remain low. Any solution that would institutionalize ethnic distinctiveness would therefore risk fueling ethnic antagonism.²⁸

The solution to the Kurdish question, pragmatically speaking, depends on several factors. First, the Turkish state needs to act in accord with its own rhetoric stipulating that the Kurdish issue is distinct from PKK terrorism. With the PKK militarily vanquished and Öcalan behind bars, the time has come for Turkey to accelerate its democratization, including the

²⁷ See *Milliyet*, Sept. 6, 1992, for the results of the poll; and Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (London: C. Hurst, 1997), pp. 245–48.

²⁸ On the perils of autonomy, see Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy: A Catalyst of Conflict in the Caucasus?" paper presented at the Fifth Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, Apr. 2000 (<http://www.geocities.com/svantec/ASNCornell.pdf>). Also see Henry J. Steiner, "Ideals and Counter-Ideals in the Struggle over Autonomy Regimes for Minorities," *Notre Dame Law Review*, vol. 66 (1991), pp. 1539–60.

removal of restrictions on cultural rights. Turkey has long opposed any easing of its strict legislation governing terrorism, freedom of expression, and cultural rights, and justifies its position with the argument that reform would imply concessions to terrorists.²⁹ Now that the specter of PKK terrorism has

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significantly diminished, a window of opportunity has emerged for the country to press forward with reforms on human rights and democratization. In so doing, Turkey could take significant steps to prevent separatist organizations from receiving popular support, and it could do so with little risk of harming its own interests. Some activists claim that Turkey should permit school instruction in Kurdish and other minority languages, but such provisions may be counterproductive.

Lack of command of the state language has proven to be a major socioeconomic impediment in countries where similar policies have been in effect, such as the Soviet Union. While retaining its unitary state structure and preserving Turkish as the sole official language of the state and the medium of education in schools, the liberalization of language laws to allow private and supplementary school instruction in minority languages would enable Kurds (and others) to retain their identity while integrating with society. Television broadcasts in Kurdish would serve a similar purpose and deal a significant blow to the PKK-aligned channel MED-TV, which (via satellite from Europe) has had a virtual monopoly on Kurdish-language programming. If the Turkish government allowed private or state-controlled Kurdish media to exist, its ability to influence the local population would increase significantly, as some high Turkish officials have acknowledged. Such measures would also improve Turkey's image in the West. In its relations with the European Union and international human rights bodies, Turkey's very defeat of the PKK rebellion makes it increasingly difficult to justify restrictions on cultural rights. An even more important step, however, would be to lift the state of emergency in the southeast. Until that happens, the country is effectively split into two juridically, with a significantly stricter legal system applied in one part of the country.

In this context, the role of Kurdish political parties deserves mention. Most Kurdish-oriented parties in the 1990s have been closed by the Constitutional Court due to alleged links to the PKK. Presently the People's Democracy Party (Halkin Demokrasi Partisi—HADEP) is under the same threat. However, the results of the 1999 general elections indicate the wide popularity of HADEP in the southeast. Although the party received only 4.7 percent of the total votes in the parliamentary election, this poor showing is largely related to the 10 percent threshold for representation in the parliament. With little chance of attaining that level nationwide, many voters

²⁹ On human rights problems and legislation in Turkey, see Dilnewaz Begum, *International Protection of Human Rights: The Case of Turkey*, report no. 43 (Uppsala, Sweden: Department of East European Studies, 1998).

concluded that a vote for HADEP was wasted. Results in the simultaneous municipal elections suggested a different picture. In many towns in the southeast, including the large cities of Van and Diyarbakir, HADEP candidates won landslide victories with up to 70 percent of the vote. This is a clear sign that large parts of the population of the southeast strongly favor a democratic representative of Kurdish rights. State attempts to destroy HADEP, either by closing down the party through legal measures or through the harassment or arrest of its leaders, are thus likely to be counterproductive. Removing the possibility of a democratic outlet for Kurdish sentiment will only fuel new illegal movements or enable the PKK to regain some strength. Despite its sometimes warranted suspicions, the state needs to tolerate and, if possible, engage HADEP and other democratic Kurdish movements instead of suppressing them.

Secondly, the economic measures consistently touted by the Turkish state must be realized. After the capture of Öcalan, the government did launch yet another large-scale investment program for the southeast, and as a result there is now a distinct possibility to attract foreign investments to the region. However, the government must take measures to ensure that development benefits the entire population and not just the tribal leaders who own most of the land and industry. Development efforts that enrich only aghas and their client networks but not the Kurdish population as a whole could provide a spark for a social explosion. The educational system, which suffered greatly from the war, also needs to be reestablished so that the Kurdish region's population can compete on equal terms in the increasingly competitive Turkish society.

Finally, the crucial issue for both democratization and economic development is the proper implementation of existing legislation. Previously, Turkey's main problem stemmed not from the legislation itself, but from a state bureaucracy that was often unable or unwilling to implement reforms. There is, however, reason to hope that this problem may be somewhat alleviated in the future. Civil associations in Turkey are growing in strength and exerting increasingly effective pressure on the government. At the same time, the end of large-scale hostilities should increase the transparency of state organs. The election of Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a prominent democrat from the judicial establishment, to the country's presidency could also have a positive effect in this context.

The multifaceted Kurdish question is central to Turkey's future, including its relations with the European Union. Its international ramifications, moreover, make it an issue of utmost importance in the regional politics of the Middle East. However, the issue is often understood or depicted in simplistic ways. A deeper understanding of the matter must take into account the tribal character of Kurdish society, the dynamics of the PKK rebellion's rise and fall, and the larger context of Turkey's ongoing democratization. It is noteworthy that the current Turkish government is dominated by parties

generally branded as “nationalist.” Besides the MHP, the Democratic Left Party of Bülent Ecevit is a center-left party with strong nationalist tendencies. However, the electoral victory of these two parties in the 1999 general elections should not be dismissed as “a nationalist wind” sweeping through the country after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan.³⁰ The anticorruption profile of these two parties and the infighting of the center-right played at least as important a role as the seizure of Öcalan. Nevertheless, the dominant political forces in Turkey today subscribe to a definition of the Kurdish problem that denies its ethnic dimension. Although the current government promotes economic development programs in the southeast, it seems unwilling, close to two years after Öcalan’s capture, to release the pressure on Kurdish-oriented political parties or to consider the easing of cultural restrictions. Without broadening its understanding of the Kurdish question and the measures needed to address it, the government is unlikely to resolve this problem. The Turkish state must therefore take advantage of the opportunity created by its victory over the PKK, because conditions have never been better to address the Kurdish question constructively and bring an end to the political instability and economic backwardness of southeastern Turkey. Having won the war, Turkey now needs to win the peace.



³⁰ For a development of this argument, see Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey: Return to Stability?” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1999), pp. 209–34.