

## TURKEY'S KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

Assist. Prof. Dr. Ozan ÖRMECİ<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Turkey's chronic "Kurdish problem" has always been a central issue in both the republic's domestic and foreign policy since its very foundation. However, the armed opposition of Kurdish ethno-nationalism has become one of the biggest challenges to the Turkish state and democracy in only the last three decades following the emergence of the PKK. In recent months, dialogue efforts and peace negotiations between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the armed Kurdish separatist movement, have intensified with the official aim declared as the disarmament of the PKK after three decades of conflict and over 30.000 deaths. The process was led by the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT) Hakan Fidan and took the full-support of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). This article aims to summarize historical details of Turkey's Kurdish question, point out some ethnic elements incorporated into Kemalism and then to discuss main policy alternatives of Turkey in coming years.

**Keywords:** PKK, Kurds, Turkey's Kurdish Question, Kemalism, Kurdish Problem, Turkish Politics.

### Introduction

Kurdish question, Kurdish problem or the Kurdish opposition has always been a controversial issue in Turkey since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 both on national and international levels. The problem is often associated with the lack of Kemalist nationalism and the Turkish state in providing democratic cultural rights and an equal citizenship status for Kurds in Turkey. The question of Kurds in Turkey is not an easy-to-solve problem mostly because of the legal status of Kurds. According to the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923, Kurds which now constitute 10 to 15<sup>2</sup> or 10 to 20<sup>3</sup> percent of the total population are not accepted as a minority group but rather as principal elements, first-class citizens of the republic. Secondly, the concept of minority has been showing a great deal of difference in different time periods and in different contexts. Thirdly, although Kurds are not accepted as a minority group and some of them are strongly against to the idea of defining themselves as a minority group, their demands to take advantage of minority group rights in accordance with European Union criterion, makes the situation even more complex. Most importantly, official Kemalist nationalism which is mostly defended as a type of modern civic nationalism has always been very popular among the Turkish origin citizens of Turkish Republic although it includes some ethnic elements. Fourthly, recent geopolitical developments in Iraq and Syria made Kurdish problem a regional and international problem rather than a democratic deficit of Turkey. Turkey's steps in terms of this problem might be also in

---

<sup>1</sup> Head of Political Science and Public Administration Department at Girne American University,

<http://www.gau.edu.tr>.

Personal website: <http://www.ozanormeci.com.tr>.

Email: [ozanormeci@gau.edu.tr](mailto:ozanormeci@gau.edu.tr).

<sup>2</sup> Özbudun, Ergun, *Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation*, p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Heper, Metin, *The State and the Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation*, p. 1.

conformity with other regional actors' positions so that there could a progress in the solution of the problem.

In her article "Turkey's Kurdish Problem: A Critical Analysis of Boundaries, Identity and Hegemony", Ümit Cizre publishes Piar-Gallup (1994) and TOBB (1995) researches' results which prove the complexity and difficulty of solving this problem. PIAR-GALLUP poll (1994) indicates that; 4.3 % of Kurdish population considers the Kurdish problem as a matter of independent Kurdish state whereas 6.4 % of the respondents label it as an issue of gaining autonomy. 28.1 % of the Kurdish respondents perceive it as a question of socioeconomic deprivation whereas the majority (51 %) of the respondents sees the problem as one of the ruthless repression by the state in the heavily Kurdish populated region of the south-east. On the other hand; 48.8 % of the Turkish respondents see the problem to be caused by a terrorist movement which aims to divide Turkey.<sup>4</sup> These statistics show that the very majority of Kurdish population does not want an independent Kurdish state carved out of Turkey but nearly half of the Turkish population sees the problem solely as a terrorism issue. TOBB research which was conducted in 1995 also points out the same difficulty in overcoming strong nationalist republican reflexes about the Kurdish problem. According to this research; 13 % of Kurdish respondents sympathized with the idea of a completely independent Kurdish state whereas 42.5 % of respondents opted for a federal administrative structure (What they understand from federalism is freedom for cultural rights and conditions for living as a Kurd more than political autonomy) and 13 % of respondents emphasized the cultural autonomy without breaking up from the existing state.<sup>5</sup> The emergence and the deeds of PKK, which led to the death of 30000 Turkish citizens over the past 30 years, strengthen the belief that Kurdish opposition is not a simple discontent about democratization and liberalization but rather a plan of establishing an independent Kurdish state and makes the situation even more difficult to solve.

These results are significant and they take their roots from the problematic history of the interaction between two communities as well as the Kemalist nationalism which has some ethnic features hidden in its civic agenda.

### **Kurds in the Ottoman State**

In order to understand Kurdish problem in Turkish Republic, one must first look at the situation of Kurds in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman State was formed by Turkic Muslim tribes in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and soon began to expand its territories. Ottoman Empire was an expansionist, multi-ethnic empire and Turks were only a part of Ottoman population. Roderic Davison gives the statistical proof about the heterogeneity of Ottoman population in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. "In the Empire, Turkish population was only around 35 percent of the total population whereas Arabs constituted 13.8 percent, Romanians 11.4 percent, Bulgarians 7.8 percent, Serbo-Croatians 7 percent, Armenians 6.5 percent, Greeks 5.5 percent, Albanians 3.1 percent, Kurds 2.6 percent and Circassians 2.6 percent".<sup>6</sup> People were separated as Muslim or

---

<sup>4</sup> Cizre, Ümit (2002), "Turkey's Kurdish Problem: A Critical Analysis of Boundaries, Identity and Hegemony" in *Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders* (eds. by Ian Lustick, Brendan O'Leary and Thomas Callaghy), Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> Davison, Roderic (1979), "Nationalism as an Ottoman Problem and the Ottoman Response" in *Nationalism in a Non-national State: The Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire* (eds. by William W. Haddad & William Ochsenwald), Columbus: Ohio State University Press, p. 31.

non-Muslim and they called themselves as Ottoman rather than Turk or Kurd. This structure of Ottoman Empire was shaped by the “millet system” understanding.<sup>7</sup>

According to millet system, Ottoman State recognized differences among different social groups in the society according to the religious beliefs. Ethnic or linguistic differences were ignored and the society was basically divided into two groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. Non-Muslims including Greeks, Armenians and Jewish subjects of the state, were considered as minority groups. The protection of non-Muslim minority groups' rights in Ottoman Empire was undertaken by European imperial powers and used as an issue to weaken the Ottoman state. Starting from 1839's the Edict of Administrative Reforms (*Tanzimat Fermanı*), Ottoman State tried to make necessary reforms to satisfy European countries and prevent them in engaging in Ottoman State's internal affairs. Except non-Muslim groups, all Muslim population was considered as first-class citizens and did not acquire the status of minority. Kurds were also part of the Muslim population and like all other Muslim groups, they were not considered as a minority group. They had relative autonomy but were still strongly tied to the central authority.

### Kemalism and Kurds

Kemalist state's attitude towards Kurds is a highly controversial but important issue for us to understand the essence of Kurdish opposition in Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's restrictive attitude towards Kurds has been generally criticized with today's norms and rules. In fact, Atatürk unlike Turkish nationalists had always recognized the distinctiveness of Kurds. He called Turks and Kurds as “*ırk kardeşi*” (brother-in-race)<sup>8</sup> because in his idea Turks and Kurds had many things in common and their cultures were very much alike.<sup>9</sup> Mustafa Kemal did not have a contact with Kurdish people until 1916, the time when he was promoted as Brigadier-General in Diyarbakır. Mustafa Kemal's diary written at those years proves us his lack of knowledge and the sense of difference he had about Kurds. “Mustafa Kemal's tone is remarkably detached: he observes his surroundings with the curiosity of an outsider. He does not express any views on the Kurds”.<sup>10</sup> Mustafa Kemal also once said that “I am in favor of granting all manner of rights and privileges in order to ensure the attachment and the prosperity and progress of our Kurdish brothers, on condition that the Ottoman State is not split up”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in his speeches in the first Turkish Grand National Assembly before the establishment of the Republic, he carefully used the term “People of Turkey” (*Türkiye halkı*) instead of Turks. In fact, Atatürk in the early 1920's even toyed with the idea of giving local autonomy to Kurds. “As for areas inhabited by Kurds, we consider it a necessity both of our domestic and of our foreign policy to set up a local government gradually”.<sup>12</sup> “As a result, wherever the population of a district is Kurdish, it will govern itself automatically”.<sup>13</sup> During

---

<sup>7</sup> Oran, Baskın (2000), *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama*, İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Mango, Andrew, “Atatürk and the Kurds”, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Metin Heper also asserts that Kurds and Turks throughout their common history in Anatolia had gone through a process of acculturation and have very similar cultures. “In brief, both before, during, and after the troubles of the 1920's-1930's and 1980's-1990's, the state has not resorted to forceful assimilation of the Kurds, because for the long centuries Kurds in Turkey had gone through a process of acculturation, or steady disappearance of cultural distinctiveness as a consequence of unforced assimilation.” See; Heper, Metin, *The State and the Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Mango, Andrew, “Atatürk and the Kurds”, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

the years of Turkish Independence War (1919-1922), Mustafa Kemal did not act harshly towards Kurds because Kurds were supporting the National Struggle and Atatürk was not willing to lose the Kurdish support. Professor Özbudun also points out this tolerant attitude of Kemalism towards Kurds during the National Struggle.<sup>14</sup> Islam was also heavily used by Atatürk during the years of National Struggle in order to mobilize Anatolian people.<sup>15</sup>

Kurdish nationalism appeared very lately during the last years of the Ottoman Empire and some Kurdish nationalist organizations such as Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (*Kürt Teali Cemiyeti*) were established. During the years of National Struggle, Kurds fought against imperial powers alongside with Turks. Kurdish problem showed itself seriously first time in 1925 with the Sheikh Said Revolt. Sheikh Said was a religious, Kurdish landowner who had good connections and reputation in the eastern and south eastern parts of the Anatolia. By making agreements with Kurdish landowners of the region who want to establish an independent Kurdistan state, Said started a huge revolt and became a headache for the young republic for a few months. Sheikh Said Revolt is often introduced as an Islamic revolt but in reality there are many other reasons behind Said's rebellion such as the desires of Kurdish people to create an independent state, the reaction of Kurdish landowners to the probable land reform project of the Republic and reactionary groups' anger towards the Westernization reforms of new secular state. Sheikh Said Revolt was suppressed by the state in few months and by the Maintenance of Order Law (*Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu*) harsh punishments were given to people who engaged in the revolt. Atatürk's relatively tolerant attitude towards Kurds began to change after the Sheikh Said rebellion. "Two years later, on 8 December 1925, the Ministry of Education announced in a proclamation on 'Currents trying to undermine Turkish unity' that use of the terms Kürt, Laz, Çerkez, Kürdistan and Lazistan would be banned".<sup>16</sup>

Another revolt called Dersim Rebellion took place in Tunceli in 1937. Dersim Revolt is known as a Kurdish-Alevi rebellion but there were still many other factors such as the feudal landlord of Dersim Seyid Rıza's opposition to the Kemalist state. Dersim (Tunceli) city in the southeast Anatolia was bombed several days during the revolt. Thousands of people died during the clash between soldiers and rebels. These two events had become very influential in the rise of Turkish Republic's harsh attitude towards Kurds. Although Kemalist Turkish state never adopted a racist approach and defined Turkishness as a civic identity, Turkish Republic did not exactly act in conformity with the conditions of the Lausanne Peace Treaty.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in contrary to the obligations of the Lausanne Treaty, Kurdish language and Kurdish names were banned. Article 39 of the Lausanne Peace Treaty is as following; "No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings. Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the Courts".<sup>18</sup> Especially in the 1930s, at a time period when the fascism and ultra-nationalism

<sup>14</sup> "Atatürk'ün 1 Mayıs 1920 günü TBMM'de yaptığı konuşma da, kendisinin bu konudaki duyarlılığını çok iyi ifade etmektedir. 'Burada maksut olan ve Meclis-i âlînizi teşkil eden zevat yalnız Türk değildir, yalnız Çerkez değildir, yalnız Kürt değildir, yalnız Laz değildir.'" (Özbudun, "Milli Mücadele ve Cumhuriyet'in resmi Belgelerinde Yurttaşlık ve Kimlik Sorunu", p. 153).

<sup>15</sup> Zürcher, Erik Jan (2000), "Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics (1908-1938)" in *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (eds. by Kemal Karpat), Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, pp. 162-163.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> Oran, Baskın (2000), *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama*, İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Oran, Baskın (2000), *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama*, İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, p. 57.

was the rising trend all over the world, Kurdish speaking citizens were punished and no adequate facilities were shown to non-Turkish speaking people in the courts. Although many of these practices began in the 1930s, the time of the fascism, which can be an excuse for Turkey's harsh attitude, Turkish Republic did not want to renounce from this understanding until very recent years. Ergun Özbudun also tries to approach to the issue by understanding the historical conditions of the period and states that Kemalism should be assessed as a total discourse.<sup>19</sup>

According to Ümit Cizre, the earlier Kurdish opposition had an Islamic character coming from the Kurdish communal identity which was based on the Khalidiya branch of Naqshbandi sect.<sup>20</sup> Cizre also asserts that the exclusion of Islam from the official Kemalist nationalism created a cleavage within the society in addition to an identity crisis and forced the state to give an existential emphasis to territorial borders.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the earlier Kurdish opposition movements which had an Islamic flavor, starting from the 1960s, pro-Kurdish cause is mostly defended by secular leftist groups and Kurdish opposition appeared more violently the late 1970s and early 1980s with the PKK terrorism which led to the death of approximately 30000 Turkish citizens.

Kurdistan Workers' Party known as PKK was established by Abdullah Öcalan in the late 1970s (on 7 November 1978). Öcalan started a separatist guerilla movement in the southeastern part of the country and his organization soon began to gain power. PKK became a real trouble for Turkish state in the 1980s and 1990s and the country faced with the danger of a civil war. PKK took support from some European countries and some neighbor countries of Turkey including Syria, Greece and Iran. The aim of PKK at those years was to create an independent Kurdish state in the south eastern part of Turkey and the ideology of the movement was Marxism-Leninism. Kurdish opposition not only existed in the form of terrorism but also in the democratic political arena through some pro-Kurdish political parties such as HEP (People's Labor Party), DEP (Democracy Party), HADEP (People's Democracy Party) and DEHAP. These parties, except four DEP deputies that entered into parliament due to the coalition between SHP (Social Democrat Populist Party) and DEP, did not have chance to be represented in the parliament because of the 10 % electoral threshold until recent years. Starting from 2007, pro-Kurdish politicians began to be represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly as members of Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), who are elected independently but later formed a groups within the parliament.

After the horrible bloody events of the 1980s, beginning with the Social Democratic Populist Party's (SHP) famous "Southeastern Report" of 1989 and the deeds of the coalition government of 1991 (DYP-SHP), the Turkish state began to make democratic reforms regarding the Kurdish question. This happened by erasing the bad memories of the September 12, 1980 military coup and its restrictive legal and constitutional attitudes toward Kurds. The

<sup>19</sup> "Üstelik, 1930'lu yıllar gibi Avrupa'nın çok büyük bölümüne otoriter, ırkçı milliyetçilik anlayışının egemen olduğu bir dönemde, bunun bizce tali bazı yönlerinin Türkiye'de görülmesi değil, bu etkinin bu kadar sınırlı kalmış olması hayret edilecek bir husustur. Bir siyasal söylemin sağlıklı olarak değerlendirilmesi, o söylemin bir bütün olarak ve dönemin şartları içinde incelenmesini, ana doğrultularıyla geçici ve tali sapmaların birbirinden ayrılmasını gerektirir. Kemalizmin milliyetçilik söylemi bir kül halinde ele alındığında, onun hukuki ve kültürel cephesinin çok daha ağır bastığına kuşku yoktur." (Özbudun, "Milli Mücadele ve Cumhuriyet'in resmi Belgelerinde Yurttaşlık ve Kimlik Sorunu", p. 158).

<sup>20</sup> Cizre, Ümit (2002), "Turkey's Kurdish Problem: A Critical Analysis of Boundaries, Identity and Hegemony" in *Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders* (eds. by Ian Lustick, Brendan O'Leary and Thomas Callaghy), Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 229.



democratic openings and reforms were generally slowed down and stopped due to anger aroused among Turkish people due to the terror. The 1990s did not become very fruitful for the solution of the problem. In the early 21st century, Turkish governments accelerated their reforms vis-à-vis the Kurdish problem with the aim of becoming a full-member of the European Union. In accordance with the democratic pressures and principles of the European Union the Turkish state began to grant cultural rights to Kurds, although group rights and federalism claims have always been considered too risky by the state.<sup>22</sup>

### **Ethnic Elements in Kemalist Nationalism**

*Vatandaş İçin Medeni Bilgiler* (Civilization Information for Citizens) was written in 1929 by Afet İnan<sup>23</sup> and published in 1931 with some additions made by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. İnan wrote this book with the aim of creating a source for Turkish citizens to learn more about the aims and principles of the new republic. The book was also used as a main school textbook until the 1950s. Although the book is not very long, it covers very important topics like the principles of Turkish Republic, rights and duties of Turkish citizens and even a short history of Turks. The book is also interesting because of its dense nationalist discourse and efforts to give self-confidence to Turkish citizens by expressing the glorious past of Turks. The book also tries to show how a good Turkish citizen should think and act. Although the author of the book is shown as Afet İnan, many people in Turkey believe that İnan acted as the voice of Atatürk in writing this book.

Kemalist version of Turkishness is often said to be a civic nationalism because it offers equal treatment to all people who call themselves as Turk. For Atatürk, race is not a valid ground for citizenship and thus, he preferred a French Revolution style citizenship concept. In his article “The Fall and Rise of Nationalism”, David McCrone talks about the differences between “ius soli” and “ius sanguinis”, soil and blood based citizenship understandings.<sup>24</sup> One must put Kemalist nationalism definitely on the “ius soli” side since the young Republic considered every individuals saying “How Happy Who Says I’m a Turk” (*Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene*) as Turkish citizens and did not make racial or religious discrimination. Thus, Kemalist nationalism should be considered as very modern for its own time when imperialism and racism were very popular among the European nation states.

In *Vatandaş İçin Medeni Bilgiler*, İnan acting as the voice of Atatürk, clearly expresses that Turkey is a monolingual country and the language of Turks is Turkish. To create a new, common and modern language was a very important part of Turkish state building project because it allowed people to speak, write in the same language and take advantage from what Benedict Anderson calls as the “simultaneity”. Simultaneity is the idea of Benedict Anderson in his famous book *Imagined Communities*, which basically expresses the importance of the language which bonds people together via journals, dialogues, radios and televisions and tie them tight by making them living in the same lantern. People in Diyarbakır and İstanbul began to hear same news, talk about same matches after the widespread of national language. Due to simultaneity, although people in Diyarbakır and İstanbul were very different from each other and they have never met before, they started to conceive themselves as members of the same solid community. So, simultaneity made the imagined nation real by making people to

<sup>22</sup> Heper, Metin (2008), *Devlet ve Kürtler*, İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, p. 268.

<sup>23</sup> Turkish historian and sociologist (1908-1985). She was one of the adopted daughters of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

<sup>24</sup> McCrone, David (1998), “The Fall and Rise of Nationalism” in *The Sociology of Nationalism* (eds. by David McCrone), London: Routledge, p. 8.

feel like they are from the same village and served as a mean of assimilation for ethnic minorities.<sup>25</sup>

In this book, İnan defined Anatolia as “Türk Eli, Türk Yurdu” by making reference to approximately 1000 years old Turkish presence in Anatolia. This fatherland image is often used in nationalist movements to increase the belonging of citizens to their territory. One other interesting part of the book is about some phrases pointing out the similar physical appearances of Turks. There are also some nationalist and even arrogant phrases about Turks and Turkishness. This was made probably deliberately by İnan and Atatürk in order to increase the self-confidence of Turkish people after the loss of a great empire.

Another very important part of the book is about Kemalist perspective for religion. There are some harsh criticisms about the effects of Islam over Turkish people in the book.<sup>26</sup> Afet İnan and some other positivist-minded revolutionaries in the Turkish Republic believed that Islam was a barrier to Turkishness and caused no advantages to Turks. On the contrary, it caused the fall of Turkish enthusiasm and nationalist feelings in their idea. She also stated that Islam is based on Arab nationalism and this is not very appropriate for Turks.<sup>27</sup> According to İnan, the umma (*ümmet*) understanding of Islam, which was used by the Ottoman Empire, caused the suppression of Turkish nationalism. She was also critical of the call to prayer that was made in Arabic language. In her idea, this created a nation that does not know what and how to believe.<sup>28</sup> One of the earlier things made by Atatürk in the following years was to translate prayer to call in Turkish language.

The book is also important to understand the Turkification efforts in the country in the 1930s. According to Martin Van Bruinessen, the deeds of the Republican elite in the 1930s are clear examples of the culturally “racial, hereditary characteristic” of Kemalist nationalism.<sup>29</sup> Bruinessen gives many examples from RPP members and ideologues. For instance, Minister of Justice Mahmut Esat Bozkurt once said; “It is my firm opinion, and let friend and foe hear it, that the lords of this country are the Turks. Those who are not real Turks (*öz Türk*) have only one right in the Turkish fatherland, and that is the right to be servants and slaves”.<sup>30</sup> Tekin Alp’s (Moiz Kohen) “Ten Commandments” to Jewish community in Turkey<sup>31</sup>, the deeds of Turkish Hearts (*Türk Ocakları*)<sup>32</sup> and the medical

<sup>25</sup> “The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.” See; Anderson, Benedict (1991), *Imagined Communities*, London, New York: Verso, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> “Türkler, İslam dinini benimsemeden önce de büyük bir ulus idi. Bu dini benimsedikten sonra, bu din, ne Arapların, ne aynı dinde bulunan İranlıların, ne de Mısırlıların ve başkalarının Türklerle birleşip bir ulus oluşturmalarına yol açtı. Tersine, Türk ulusunun ulusal bağlarını gevşetti; ulusal duygularını, ulusal coşkusunu uyuşturdu”. See; İnan, Afet (1931), *Vatandaş İçin Medeni Bilgiler*, İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> “Çünkü Muhammed’in kurduğu din bütün ulusallıkların üstünde yaygın bir Arap ulusçuluğu politikasına dayanıyordu.” (İnan, p. 18).

<sup>28</sup> “Bununla birlikte Allah’a kendi ulusal dilinde değil, Allah’ın Arap budununa gönderdiği Arapça kitapla ibadet ve duada bulunacaklardı. Bu durum karşısında Türk ulusu birçok yüzyıllar boyunca ne yaptığını, ne yapacağını bilmeksizin, adeta bir sözcüğün bile anlamını anlamadan Kuran’ı ezberleyip beyni sulanmış hafızlara döndüler.” (İnan, p. 18).

<sup>29</sup> Van Bruinessen, Martin (1997), “Race, Culture, Nation and Identity Politics in Turkey: Some Comments”, Paper presented at the conference on Identity and Nationalism in Turkey convened by Erteğin Endowment and the Dept. Of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University April 1997, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

metaphor used by the Interior Ministry inspector Hamdi Bey<sup>33</sup> are other examples given by Bruinessen. The establishment and the deeds some state institutions such as People's Home (*Halk Evleri*) and Village Institutes (*Köy Enstitüleri*) are nothing but other examples of Turkification policy of the state for Zürcher.<sup>34</sup> Examples given by Bruinessen and Zürcher are convincing enough to point out that Kemalism in the 1930s included some ethnic and discriminative elements compared to other constitutional citizenship models.

### **A Critical Look to Peace Negotiations with PKK**

In recent months, dialogue efforts and peace negotiations between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the armed Kurdish separatist movement, have intensified with the official aim declared as the disarmament of the PKK after three decades of conflict and over 30000 deaths. The process was led by the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT) Hakan Fidan and took the full-support of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), with its new leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has been giving positive messages for the process, although there are different voices within the party. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP), on the other hand, in accordance with its Turkish nationalist ideology has been criticizing the process though the party's leadership seems very careful in not creating political rivalries that could easily turn into street clashes as was seen in the 1970s. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the party of Kurds alleged to have links to the PKK, seems supportive but also passive and ineffective. Although the majority of people in Turkey seem very hopeful and supportive for the peace process nowadays, a critical look is still needed since the media, likely due to government request, cannot provide a critical look at the process.

The first and obvious problem of the process is the negligence and inability of the government and MIT to use political psychology methods in convincing people on both sides about the unsustainable nature of the current situation. It's no surprise to see that two of the most important actors representing Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms, the MHP and BDP, do not seem very influential and willing in the process, which makes achieving a real peace very difficult. Forcing TV channels and newspapers to make propaganda for the process is not enough to change the logic and feelings of people, especially those who are negatively affected by terror. There should be more efforts to convince people of the rightness of this process.

The second problem is about the nature of the peace talks. The peace talks include negotiations with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan with a focus on Öcalan's imprisonment conditions as well as the PKK's disarmament rather than Kurdish rights. The recent assassination of three women connected to the PKK in Paris clearly shows that there are and could be more varying factions within the PKK. It also shows that Öcalan might not be able to control his whole organization. Moreover, although in time the PKK has turned into an economic organization rather than a militia party, it still has some political purposes and the imprisonment conditions of Öcalan and disarmament negotiations might not be enough for Kurdish political activists in the long run. What is needed is forging a real peace with Kurds.

<sup>33</sup> "Cumhuriyet devrinin, şiarı, memleketin esaslı ihtiyaçlarını esasından tedavi etmek ve asıl hastalığı tedavi eylemek olduğu için burada da mednei usullerle bir tedbir düşünüldü." (Bruinessen, p. 6).

<sup>34</sup> Zürcher, Erik Jan (2000), "Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics (1908-1938)" in *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (eds. by Kemal Karpat), Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, p. 177.



Thirdly, the conjuncture and timing of the process seems to be very bad and unfortunate since Turkey has serious political problems with its neighbors, including Syria, Iran and Iraq after the failure of its “zero problems with neighbors” policy. In addition, Turkey’s problems with Israel, the negative image of Turkey in European countries due to the freezing of its EU membership bid are all evidence that shows this may not be the best time for such a bold policy open to provocations. It is also highly questionable why the government did not take these steps even though President of the Republic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has an uncontested power in his hands since 2007.

Fourthly, Turkish public opinion and Turkish political actors don’t seem ready or conscious about what could take place if these peace talks turn out to be successful and PKK members (especially Öcalan) become legitimate political actors. Since peace talks do not provide a final solution agreed to between the state and the PKK, the politicization of the PKK’s aim means a more intense and dangerous political atmosphere that is open to provocation. This lack of preparation may cause the transformation of the Kurdish question into the Turkish question in the near future.

Fifthly, since the negotiations and peace talks are directed by MIT, this could be perceived as a state policy rather than a civilian democratic opening. The Turkish Grand National Assembly could be the right place for such a policy, but the government seems to forget about basic democratic principles and the sanctuary of democracy that is Parliament in this process.

### **Alternatives**

Having reached this stage of negotiations with PKK, Turkish state seems to have few alternatives considering Kurdish question. The first alternative, mostly defended by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President of the Republic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is to promote Islam and common religious and factional characteristics of Turks and Kurds and trying to solve the Kurdish problem under the banner of Islam. It is a fact that the religiosity level among Kurds is very high and this gives Turkish state to be more effective in the region against PKK and its supporters. However, increasing dose of Islam will certainly make Westernized and secular groups in the country as well as Alevis even more uncomfortable and reduce their loyalty to the regime.

The second alternative is nothing but the continuation of the Kemalist modernization paradigm which is defended by Turkish Nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and some groups within the social democratic main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). This alternative is based on the infrastructural and industrial progress in the region in order to suppress Kurdish secessionism as well as the use or the threat of military power. 1990s witnessed Turkish state’s extreme use of power against PKK and eventually after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999, Turkish state became really close to destroy PKK. However, later developments such as the US invasion of Iraq created a comfortable ground for PKK to recruit new members and to recover. This alternative may not seem very attractive to Turkish people since it will remind them the bloody memories of the 1990s.

The third alternative is based on the structural political and cultural reforms about the Kurdish question and defended mostly by Turkish socialists and Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) members. Turkish socialist left and Kurds offer a new federal system throughout the country or a privilege of local autonomy given to southeastern part of the country where

Kurds constitute the very high majority. This alternative seems more in conformity with liberal democratic principles, however, looking at the situation of other ethnic-based federation attempts in the Middle East (last example is obviously Iraq), one can easily notice that this attempt may lead to eventual break up of the country or a civil war emerging between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists. This alternative will be considered also as too risky by the Turkish state institutions and thus, does not seem like an attractive alternative.

### **A Mixed Model?**

Although none of these three alternatives can be directly successful and help Turkey in solving its Kurdish question, a mixed model for this problem might be created by the Turkish state. In this model, the strong religiosity and the religious brotherhood of Turks and Kurds can be used as an advantage for the Turkish state to provide integration between Turks and Kurds especially in the southeastern regions. However, the secular nature of the regime must be carefully protected so that other people in the country would not be disturbed. Again, this mixed model can take some good sides of the second model and try to initiate new development projects in the southeastern regions especially in terms of tourism. In addition, with some social projects, a new feeling of trust can be created between Kurds and Turkish Armed Forces personnel in order make the terrorist organization weaker. This model might also include some projects defended by BDP and can grant new cultural rights to Kurds such as the opportunity to establish schools giving education in local languages including Kurdish in addition to ordinary state school giving Turkish education. These schools can be coordinated by the Ministry of Education and can provide education on the week-ends. In addition, new local autonomies could be granted to all municipalities in the country in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. These moves might make Kurdish secessionists more loyal and attached to the state.

### **Federalism Discussions**

Although still considered as too risky by most of the Turkish state officials, federal option can also be discussed right now during the peace process going on between the state and the terrorist organization. Unfortunately, in Turkey this topic is seen until now as a political taboo mostly because of fears against Islamist rightist parties' dominance in the political spectrum which could be worsened with a Presidential system based on SMDP (majority) voting. However, in fact, in a carefully designed Presidential system with all check and balance mechanisms similar to USA, secular democratic nature of the Turkish political system might be better protected. Here RPP, pro-European and pro-secular social democratic party coming from Kemalist tradition, is affraid of never coming to power with such a system since they know that the party's natural electoral boundary is maximum around 30 %. Same for Turkish nationalist NAP, whose natural electoral boundary is limited to 20 %. However, in a Presidential system, these two parties could engage in unification process or at least in an electoral coalition similar to what they did in the last Presidential elections, by showing previous secretary-general of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Prof. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as their common candidate and got around 40 %, a record for RPP since Bülent Ecevit's miraculous result of % 41 in 1977 elections. A republican left-nationalist right coalition similar to Republican Party in the US might work very well for these two parties in a Presidential system if they could come up with charismatic and refined candidates similar to Mr. İhsanoğlu.



*Turkey's 7 geographical zones<sup>35</sup>*

Another prejudice towards Presidential system in Turkey is related to federalism which automatically brings fears about Kurdish secessionism in the country which led to the death of 30.000 Turkish citizens over the last 30 years because of the PKK terrorism. However, if the federal status of the state could be guaranteed and finalized in the constitution, with a strong political support given to the state by Kurdish nationalists, this might in fact weaken Kurdish secessionism instead empowering it. Here, one should not forget that Turkish state already divided the country into 7 geographical zones which might be used as a perfect basis to create 7 states (eyalet) within the federal Turkish state. In terms security and foreign policy issues, if these states are strongly tied to the central authority in Ankara, their local parliament will not harm anybody in the country and will not create any anxieties towards secessionism. Federalism option could also be assessed if Turkey is ready to solve Kurdish problem quickly with one macro move. However, until now, Turkish state seems still loyal to the unitary nature of the state and thus, chances of a federalism-based solution do not seem very high concerning the Kurdish question.

## Conclusion

Although some points made by critics of Kemalist nationalism such as Erik Jan Zürcher and Martin Van Bruinessen correctly point out some ethnic elements involved in the Kemalist nationalism, they still do not prove that the official state ideology was based on the discrimination of a particular group (Kurds) before the law. Kemalist nationalism was based on “ius soli” principle and did not offer a blood-based racial citizenship. In that sense, Kemalism never lost its civic character as an ideology although many problems took place between Kurdish people and some Turkish state officials throughout the Turkish Republican history.

The problem in Turkey today on other hand, is different from this historical issue. In contemporary Turkey, the problem is that some of the Kurds are not satisfied with equal citizenship offered by the Turkish state under the name of “Turkish nation” (Türk milleti).

<sup>35</sup> See; Örmeci, Ozan (2015), “Turkey Towards Presidentialism?”, *Uluslararası Politika Akademisi*, Date of Accession: 17.01.2015 from <http://politikaakademisi.org/turkey-towards-presidentialism/>.

They want their ethnic identity to be written into the constitution and ask for decentralization reforms which could eventually turn into break-up scenarios. Until now, these demands are seen as too risky for the Turkish state. Thus, Kurdish question is still not an easy problem to solve. However, if Turkish state achieves to develop a mixed model by incorporating good aspects of three different policy alternatives in relation to this problem, there might a new period of optimism flourishing in the country. Federal option can also be discussed now in Turkey since Turkish people seem to get really tired of terrorism and living in a state of constant emergency.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict (1991), *Imagined Communities*, London, New York: Verso.
- Cizre, Ümit (2002), "Turkey's Kurdish Problem: A Critical Analysis of Boundaries, Identity and Hegemony" in *Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders* (eds. by Ian Lustick, Brendan O'Leary and Thomas Callaghy), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davison, Roderic (1979), "Nationalism as an Ottoman Problem and the Ottoman Response" in *Nationalism in a Non-national State: The Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire* (eds. by William W. Haddad & William Ochsenwald), Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Heper, Metin (2008), *Devlet ve Kürtler*, İstanbul: Doğan Kitap.
- Heper, Metin (2007), *The State and the Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation*, Houndsmill, Basingstone, Hampshire, U.K.: Macmillan/Palgrave.
- İnan, Afet (1931), *Vatandaş İçin Medeni Bilgiler*, İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası.
- Mango, Andrew (1999), "Atatürk and the Kurds", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Seventy-Five Years of the Turkish Republic (Oct., 1999), pp. 1-25.
- McCrone, David (1998), "The Fall and Rise of Nationalism" in *The Sociology of Nationalism* (eds. by David McCrone), London: Routledge.
- Oran, Baskın (2000), *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama*, İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları.
- Örmeci, Ozan (2015), "Turkey Towards Presidentialism?", *Uluslararası Politika Akademisi*, Date of Accession: 17.01.2015 from <http://politikaakademisi.org/turkey-towards-presidentialism/>.
- Özbudun, Ergun (2004), *Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- Özbudun, Ergun (1998), “Milli Mücadele ve Cumhuriyet’in resmi Belgelerinde Yurttaşlık ve Kimlik Sorunu” in *75 Yılda Tebaa’dan Yurttaş’a Doğru* (eds. by Artun Ünsal) , İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları.
- Van Bruinessen, Martin (1997), “Race, Culture, Nation and Identity Politics in Turkey: Some Comments”, Paper presented at the conference on Identity and Nationalism in Turkey convened by Erteğün Endowment and the Dept. Of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University April 1997.
- Zürcher, Erik Jan (2000), “Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics (1908-1938)” in *Ottoman Past and Today’s Turkey* (eds. by Kemal Karpat), Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.