



CONTRASTS AND SOLUTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Thoughts on the State and the Kurdish Identity in Turkey

Baskin Oran

The Adoption of Assimilation Policy by the Turkish State and its Reasons

To put it simply, and broadly speaking, State policy on group identity can be divided into two main categories: Assimilation and Integration.

Assimilation is an attempt by the State to homogenize society through the elimination of all forms of divergence; cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic etc. If in any given society there is a high rate of diversification, and in particular if prosperity is low, then it is not unusual for this policy to be implemented by means of force. When this occurs, the unity of the State can be achieved for a limited time, but it is usually very difficult to create and keep the desired unity for long. This is because unity, as in a marriage, is something that can only be voluntary and cannot be imposed.

In integration, however, the purpose is to create a unity between diversities. In an analogy, where assimilation could be likened to a 'grinder', integration would be a 'salad bowl' in which all the ingredients of the salad (sub-cultures) retained their distinctive characteristics and the main taste stemmed from the dressing (the upper-culture).

Since its foundation in 1923, The Turkish Republic has opted for the first alternative. Hence, in what follows, I shall offer my thoughts on the underlying reasons for this choice, in relation to both the internal and the external contexts:

The Internal Context: The Legacy of the Ottoman Empire.

1) The impact of the 'Millet System':

The Turkish Republic is an extension of the Ottoman Empire, at the core of which was the *Millet* System. At the very heart of this concept lay religion. Every religion (and, in the case of the Christians, every confession) was considered a different *millet*¹. Accordingly, all Muslims, regardless of their other differences, belonged to the same 'Muslim Nation' (*umma*). Therefore, Kurds

1. 'Millet' which then meant 'religious community', is used for 'nation' now.

were never considered to be any different from Turks despite their diverse ethnic, linguistic features etc.

When the Republic was founded, the legacy of the *Millet* System was very well suited to the nationalist policy of a State that did not allow multiple identities.

2) The Young Turk tradition:

In the second decade of the 20th Century, the Young Turks (*Ittihat ve Terakki Firkasi*, The Party of Union and Progress) dominated the political scene in the Empire. Their 'Turkification' policies of course excluded any cultural identity other than Turkish. Mustafa Kemal and the other architects of the Republic all came from this school of thought and were to apply the principals of this powerful heritage.

3) The anticipation of the Ottoman disintegration:

The Ottoman Empire went through a rapid fragmentation during the 19th Century leading up to the point of its final collapse at the end of the First World War. Indeed, the Empire which once spanned three continents was reduced to a small nation-state squeezed into the Anatolian Peninsula. Since the Republic inherited almost the same mosaic of peoples, the concern about a similar occurrence happening terrified both the Turkish people and the elite. The fear of losing the precious peninsula also contributed a great deal to the intolerance with which cultural identities other than Turkish were regarded.

4) The Kurdish Uprisings:

The above-mentioned worry turned into sheer paranoia when there was a serious uprising in 1925 started by the Kurdish underground organization *Azadi* (formed in 1923); a mere sixteen months after the advent of the Republic. Only in 1938 was the State able to put out the fire created by these uprisings.

The External Context: The Fascist Atmosphere of the Inter-war Years

In the years between the two World Wars, the Turkish Republic was founded and Kemalism was developed as the nationalist ideology. This period, during which the Kemalists fought the Kurdish uprisings, was characterized above all by Italian, German, Eastern European and Balkan integral nationalisms; the slogans of which found resonance among the Kemalists: *Ein Volk* - The Turkish Nation; *Ein Reich* - The Turkish State; *Ein Partei* - The People's Republican Party founded by M. Kemal, the '*Ein Führer*'.

Much in the same way as the *Millet* System mentioned above, the international feeling was very well suited to Turkish nationalism as formulated by the Kemalist elites; who were themselves students of French Jacobinism to begin with.

In conclusion then, all of these internal and external issues contributed to the strong tendency towards assimilation in the Turkish Republic. I shall now turn the discussion towards the reasons for the failure of this assimilationist policy.

Reasons for the failure of the State's assimilation policies towards the Kurds

One must admit that the Turkish State has been quite successful in its nation building project. Bosnians, Pomaks, Albanians, Cretans, Circassians, Abhaz, Tatars, Georgians, Laz etc. were successfully united under the generic name and common cultural identity of the Turkish Nation (*'Türk Milleti'*). This is perhaps easily accounted for by at least two factors. Firstly, all these peoples were Muslims, and the non-Muslims in Turkey were less than three percent of the whole population. Secondly, all these peoples were Balkan or Transcaucasian immigrants. One must draw attention to the fact that immigrants, in contrast to autochthonous peoples, are rather more inclined to adapt to their new country rather than assert their own nationalism.

The one significant exception to the success of Kemalist nationalism was the Kurds; an autochthonous people. Today the failure of Kemalism's nation-building process with regard to the Kurds — at least a sizable proportion of them, seems obvious. I shall propose the following reasons for this failure:

Historical Reasons

1) The concept of 'nation-state' relies on the assumption that state and nation are identical. This understanding, however, falls short of capturing the reality in the Middle-East where practically all States are multi-national and all peoples are trans-frontier.

2) Assimilationist policy in Turkey did not only affect the Kurds, but also made the Turks blind to the issue. Up until the 1990s there was no public opinion favourable to the demands of the Kurds, because 'the Turk on the street' was not even aware that there were Kurds in Turkey, let alone a Kurdish problem. It was only after the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) began its terrorist activities in 1984 that people in general first heard about it.

3) Kurdish nationality is too deeply rooted and powerful to be assimilated. The first Kurdish 'nationalist' newspaper *Kurdistan*² came out in 1898 — only three years after the publication of *Mesveret*, the Young Turks' newspaper. Furthermore, along with the *Mesrutiyet* (Second Constitution-1908) various Kurdish associations and publications which highlighted Kurdish cultural characteristics (language, epics, myths, etc.) flourished. After the *Mütareke* (Armistice of 1918) there were others claiming independence. As was stated earlier, the very secret revolutionary organization (*Azadi*) which started the 1925 uprising³, was founded before the Republic was declared and the Kurdish rebellions were not to be put down until 1938. Consequently, the memory and bitterness of such a deep rooted and intensive nationalist conflict were passed on from generation to generation and the awareness of Kurdish consciousness was perpetuated.

Structural Reasons

1) The concept of a 'common fatherland' relies heavily on national economic activity. 'Common national sentiment' can only be developed in those areas included in the 'national economic market'. Because of the late arrival of the impact of Turkish industrialization — due to the mountainous nature of the terrain and the tough climate — the high concentration of Kurds in Eastern Anatolia were only recently included in the latter concept. On the other hand, Kurdish nationalism flourished there very early. Had it been the other way around, i.e., had the common economic market included this part of the peninsula before Kurdish nationalism was born, assimilation might have stood a chance.

2) Even in countries which seem to enjoy much more prosperity and a strong sense of national unity, we observe the appearance of nationalist movements in cases where economic disparities juxtapose confessional, religious, ethnic, etc. differences. Eastern Anatolia has been at a constant disadvantage ever since the world trade routes shifted away from there (16th Century).

2. For a complete collection (transcription) of this first Kurdish newspaper see Mehmet Emin Bozarslan (ed. and translator), *Kurdistan, İlk Kürd Gazetesi* (1898-1902), 2 Cilt, Uppsala, Deng Yayınevi, 1 Kasım 1991, 580s. + Facsimile.

3. The Sheik Said Uprising of 1925 was so called because the secular and modern nationalist *Azadi* leaders who came from the ranks of the Ottoman Army and of the *Hamidiye* Regiments (irregular Kurdish troops organized by Abdülhamit II to combat Armenian nationalism) knew they could influence Kurdish people only through a religious leader, hence Sheik Said.

In the present atmosphere of globalization, communication and transportation links with Eastern Anatolia have improved. However, what travelled through these channels was not economic development, but information alone. So therefore the Kurds' relative depreciation has further increased through comparisons with the Turkish west. Hence, their 'awareness of being neglected' has also grown to an intolerable level.

3) Modernization without development creates social mobility, which in turn, creates new demands. Institutional inability to meet these demands forces the system to collapse. This is precisely the situation in Turkey today. The system denies or rejects new demands (such as broadcasting in Kurdish, for instance), and insists on assimilation as though it were still possible.

4) Deeply rooted Kurdish nationality, ill-defined industrialization, urbanization, and education, inevitably led to the rise of the Kurdish intellectuals. Needless to say, in underdeveloped countries, intellectuals lead—and even create—nationalism.

Ideological and Political Reasons

1) Secularism was a fundamental principle of the new 'nation-to-be'. Thus, the first act of the Republic was the abolishment of the Khalifate. The Khalifate, however, symbolized the only link between Turks and Kurds: Islam. Dismantling this tie gave rise, in an atmosphere of persistent emphasis on the Turkish element, a further strengthening of the sense of discrimination among the Kurds.

2) The leading policy of the Republic vis-a-vis the Kurds, such as the one represented by Field Marshal Fevzi Çakmak, was based on the strategy of preventing Kurdish nationalism through the isolation of the Kurds. This policy was rigidly enforced up until the 1950s. Therefore, assimilation was applied by only a handful of civil administrators, military personnel and teachers.

3) The upper-identity which the Republic sought to impose upon the Kurds could have reached the province by means of industrialization alone, but under these conditions it did not. On the contrary, the province came to the large cities of the west after the 1950s due to domestic migration for economic and educational purposes. Indeed, both in developed and underdeveloped countries alike, big cities have always been the cradle of nationalism. Turkey was no

exception to the rule, as the contemporary Kurdish nationalist elites flourished among the university youth in major cities like Istanbul and Ankara.

4) The Ottoman Empire, like all other large empires, was based on the respect shown to various identities (Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Kurdish, Laz, etc). The Empire gathered all these diverse *lower-identities* under the *upper identity* of 'Ottomanism', which was identical to none of these. The Turkish Republic inevitably inherited this rich variety of lower-identities and yet the upper-identity it imposed eliminated all others but one: Turkish. The term 'Nation of Turkey' ('*Türkiye Milleti*') used by Mustafa Kemal during the War of Independence was never to be heard again after the date of the declaration of the Republic (October 29th, 1923) as it was definitely replaced by that of 'Turkish Nation' ('*Türk Milleti*')⁴. This led, at least one of the lower-identity groups, namely the Kurds, who fought alongside the Turks⁵, to feel left out after the war.

5) The most important issue to be considered when discussing assimilation is the meaning implied by the word 'Turk'. The term had three different but interrelated meanings in Turkey: Firstly, it referred to citizenship. All the citizens of Turkey were called Turks. Secondly, within the international atmosphere of nazism and fascism, the term soon gained ethnic connotations closely related to racism. This second usage of the word was to prevent the integration of the Kurds into the third meaning of the term, the most important one — that of nation.

When Kurdish nationalism found a sympathetic international audience in the ethnic nationalist context of the 1990s, the chances of assimilation finally fell to nil.

Cultural Autonomy, the Turkish State, and the Kurds

Why is cultural autonomy— in different ways— so important to both the Kurds and to the State? In other words, why do the Kurds want to have a different cultural identity and why is the Turkish state so reluctant to concede this?

The answer to the first question is easy: Social identity, needless to mention, is of enormous importance to the individual. In particular, being

4. See my *Atatürk Milliyetçiliği — resmî ideoloji dışı bir inceleme* (Kemalist Nationalism, a non-official interpretation), 3rd ed., Ankara, Bilgi Publ., April 1993: 208.

5. This was because of two common denominators: Anticipation of the Armenian vengeance, and the will 'to liberate the Khalifate'.

unable, under pressure from the State, to use the mother-tongue which one has spoken since birth can be seen as a hindrance par excellence, and one that alienates the individual from society. Even further, this socio-cultural alienation should be seen as one of the most important factors underlying the rebellion of this group⁶.

The answer to the second question is also easy: As I have already noted above in 'The legacy of the Empire', in the atmosphere which made assimilation impossible (at least for the Kurds) the Turkish State is worried that; 'To recognize Kurdish identity by conceding cultural autonomy, would be to risk the disintegration of the country, as they would surely then demand their independence'.

To this, the best remark perhaps is made by the renowned novelist Yasar Kemal (who calls himself 'The most Kurdish of all the Turks and the most Turkish of all the Kurds'); 'If we refuse to give them cultural autonomy, will they not then ask for independence?'

In actual fact, the fear of the Turkish State is not that ridiculous. Until now, all nationalisms began as cultural nationalisms and only stopped at the final objective— independence.

But what about today? In the era of globalization where the nation-state begins to 'wither away' under the influence of 'bourgeois internationalism', will Kurdish nationalism in Turkey today go as far the 'final objective', or will it end at an earlier stage, such as cultural autonomy?

I will try to answer this, the *million dollar* question, by developing four criteria barely touched upon by a very distinguished student of nationalism, the late Ernest Gellner, at a lecture he gave in Ankara in December 1993.

During his lecture, Professor Gellner had modestly answered my question on the future of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey by saying that he did not 'know much about Kurdish nationalism', but would nevertheless, 'say a few things in general' on the conditions for the success of nationalist movements. He then cited the following four criteria: numerical strength, density, historical continuity, and motivation.

Numerical Strength of the Ethnic Group

The size of the ethnic group is important in the strive for independence. Today, there are many members of the UN with a population of a few hundred thousand only. Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent are estimated to number

6. See Professor Dogu Ergil's articles on pluralism and multi-culturalism in his *Bir Düz Bir Ters* (Backward-Forward), Istanbul, Milliyet Publ., 1995:146-65 and 215-20.

12 million. This would no doubt qualify the Kurds to set up an independent country of their own. Therefore, this criterion is fully met.

Concentration of the Ethnic Group in a Particular Region

If a nationalist movement of an ethnic group is concentrated in a particular region of a country, its chances of achieving independence are greater. Today, it is widely estimated that some sixty percent of the Kurds live in western Turkey; well away from their home region in the east and the southwest. Given the great disparity in the prosperity levels of the two parts, these people can hardly be expected to return within the next successive generation. In Istanbul alone there are two million Kurds. Therefore, I do not believe that this criterion is met. (*A minus*).

Historical Continuity of the Movement

There is perfect continuity in the Kurdish nationalist ideology and movement in Turkey. Themes like cultural autonomy and the like put forward by the Kurds today are to be found in *Jin*⁷, published in 1918-19. Except for the relatively brief period of 1938-1959 there is practically no break in the nationalist movement. I think this criterion is fully met. (*A plus*).

Motivation towards Independence

Are the Kurds fully motivated to set up an independent Kurdish state of their own or do they find it somehow more suitable to their interests to stay in Turkey? Unlike the other three, this criterion is subjective and therefore much more important than the others, so I would like to study it in more detail:

1) Geopolitical Position of the Future 'Independent State':

If the piece of land to be independent is located adjacent to a border line rather than in the middle of the country, and if it enjoys objective conditions for survival, its chances of gaining independence are greater.

Presumably, the most suitable area for an 'Independent Kurdish State' would be southeastern Turkey, along the Syrian and Iraqi frontier. This case would be a positive advantage (*A plus*). On the other hand, the fact that it would be landlocked and surrounded by at least four (surely hostile) countries

7. For the transcription of this periodical, so important to Kurdish nationalism, see Mehmet Emin Bozarslan (Ed. and translator into Turkish), *Jin* (Kovare Kurdî Tirkî), 1918-1919, Vol. 5, Uppsala, We anxana Deng, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988.

(Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey), having no natural resources to rely on, and most probably troubled by tribal and other rivalries, would not positively motivate the Kurds. I think it's realistic, therefore, to put a *minus* sign against this one; which means that this criterion is only partly met.

2) The Possibility of Adopting an Irredentist Policy:

If the prospective 'independent state' has a chance to implement an irredentist policy following independence, then nationalist Kurds will be more motivated to support independence. Irredentism refers to a policy adopted by a State to include the people of its own ethnicity who live close to its borders. In this particular case this is Pan-Kurdism.

On the one hand, the Kurds live in three neighbouring countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria) and it should also be noted that following the Gulf War an embryonic Kurdish State was established in Northern Iraq as a 'Safe Haven'. On the other hand, however, the Kurds of Turkey are far different than those in the other countries; in terms of development, democracy, social class, leadership, and language. Moreover, the sense of unity among the Kurds has historically always been weak. Hence, this criterion is only partly met.

3) International Conjuncture

The atmosphere of the international arena should be suitable for the birth of such a State in such a sensitive part of the world. In this regard, we can list at least three points:

Firstly; a number of independent states emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc. This climate would appear to be conjusive to the establishment of a Kurdistan. However, the opposite could also hold true because of the chaotic picture created by these new states.

Secondly; the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is placing heavy emphasis on the issue of human rights, minority rights, and local cultures. Furthermore, this is the age of 'ethnic nationalism'. On the other hand, Western countries are not seeking to foster independence at the cost of breaking up existing states; they only push for the introduction of cultural rights.

Thirdly; globalization has brought the 'Age of Nationalism' to the beginning of the end. Just as nation-states replaced the feudal order when European bourgeoisies needed to erect national frontiers to protect their economic

interests against other bourgeoisies, the very same classes of the very same Western countries are now tearing down the very same frontiers to enlarge the 'national market' to encompass the entire globe. In this holocaust, one single culture, the capitalist culture of the West is encouraging, with ever greater speed and vigour, the whole world in the direction of 'international (read: materialistic) values'. Material wealth, more than ever, is everything. In this 'Age of Globalization', concepts like 'national pride' are fast becoming less important than blue jean brands. In such a cultural atmosphere, the fate of a new land, complete with economic and other problems, is bound to appeal less and less to the dreams of men. Therefore, I do not believe that this criterion is met.

Now, let us come to the last point in the question of 'Motivation', namely, *Expectation*. And since the score of minuses and pluses above is about equal, this point is so important that I would prefer to classify it as a fifth criterion rather than a sub-division of Motivation.

Expectation

In a world of 'globalization', where the materialistic values of the West flood every corner of the globe, raising material expectations like a rocket, which alternative would provide the Kurds of Turkey a better life; an independent Kurdish state, or Turkey?

If the Kurds were no longer prevented from enjoying the material and cultural life which they aspire to in Turkey, then there are strong chances that they would not go as far as independence. There are several reasons why they might do so: They have been living and inter-marrying with the Turks for five centuries. They might have scruples about the new independent Kurdish state because there is a feudal tradition of Kurds fighting against one another. The PKK's (nationalist Kurdish organization) use of terror as the main means of achieving independence is just as ruthless towards fellow Kurds as it is towards anyone else. Also, the new state would be landlocked by hostile neighbours and would have very few natural resources to live on.

If, on the other hand, the Kurdish people give up all hope of attaining the material and cultural life they aspire to in Turkey, this 'new hope' may well be very attractive to them despite all possible future difficulties. If both the material and cultural expectancies are not met at the same time, then the 'new hope' will grow ever bigger in their hearts and minds. In other words, the Republic of Turkey would have to provide the Kurds with both 'bread' and 'freedom'.

A last question to settle: What if the Kurds use this 'freedom' (cultural rights) to go as far as independence?

All the solutions so far offered by the Republic of Turkey to 'settle the Eastern (Kurdish) question' have been based on not recognizing the Kurds as Kurds. The results of this policy are only too obvious: Thirty thousand dead on both sides since 1984, to say the least.

Just about everything has been tried in the attempt to find a solution to the matter — except respecting the cultural identity of the Kurdish citizens. In a world where even marriages cannot be made to last by coercion, this is the only tack that has not been tried yet in the matter of finding a way for Turks and Kurds to live together; this is the last thing left in Pandora's box.