

Rasit Tadik

The emergence and development of the Kurdish issue in the Republic Turkey

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Introduction: The independence of Turkey and Kurdish

The Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War and the country's partition lead to the sultan's authority depreciation that resulted in the Turkish War of Independence (*İstiklâl Harbi*, or *Kurtuluş Savaşı*) where Turkish nationalists and Kurdish tribes under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk united against the Allies. On May 19, 1919, the Mustafa Kemal landed with his supporters in Samsun what marks the beginning liberation war. In the Declaration of Havza issued on May 28, 1919 he called for resistance against Allies. As a result of the meeting in Amasaya on June 13, the circular was printed which signalled the need to conduct congress in the eastern provinces of Anatolia in Erzurum which was aimed to gain the support from the Kurds, before the national congress planned in Sivas. Finally, in accordance to Amasya Circular the Erzurum Congress, an assembly of Turkish Revolutionaries held from 23 July to 4 August 1919 was held. During the Congress set of decisions have been taken that shaped the future conduct of Turkish War of Independence¹. Furthermore, the Congress promised that after the War the Kurdish will be given autonomy. Consequently, the Kurdish troops supported the independence movement and played an indispensable role in the overall nationalist victory². However, the promise of autonomy was never given and later on it was cut off from the resolutions and never showed up in any Turkish text books. Simply the Mustafa Kemal toyed with the idea of Kurdish autonomy. Gunter states

¹ M. Kirzioglu, *Bütünüyle Erzurum Kongresi (Complete Erzurum Congress)*, Istanbul 1993, p. 131.

² M. Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*, New York 1997, p. 6.

that “the Amasya interview and the proceeding of the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses in 1919, make this clear that it would be a Kurdish autonomy, however, proved to be the way not taken”³.

The Lausanne Treaty, the only treaty signed by Turkish representatives to be still in force among the international instruments signed to end the First World War obliged newly created states to protect minorities⁴. However, the concept of minorities’ rights introduced by the Article 37 of the Treaty defined minority as a non-Muslim without consideration of ethno-linguistic features.

First of all, one needs to comprehend the twofold legacy of Ottoman Empire, which were the old-age *Millet* System and the nationalist Ittihat Terraki Party. The old-age *Millet* System generally divided the whole population into the Muslim and non-Muslim. As Abdualaziz stated ‘the term of *Millet* refers to the confessional communities in the Ottoman Empire’. Every religion was considered different „*Millet*”. For example, the Christians were different *Millet*, Jews were different *Millet* and Muslims were different *Millet*. Regardless their ethnic groups all Muslims were Muslim Nation.

Thus, Kurds were never considered to have a separate identity. When the Republic of Turkey established this legacy of *Millet*, it justified the nationalist policy of the State which abhorred the multiple identities. Another legacy which was used was the Ittihat Terraki Party policy. This party was nationalist oriented, which was constituted by the group of people who called themselves Young Turk. The new elite of Turkish descended from this party. As Oran⁵ claimed that “the second decade of the 20th century the Young Turk dominated the political scene in the Empire”. The advent of policy of the Young Turk was to save the Empire by the means of *Ottomanism and Islamism*, however, this policy did not pan out. Thus, in the eventual collapse of the Empire, they cogitated behind the closed doors that the only way to rescue the Empire was *Turkification and Westernization*; therefore, this approach was extremely hostile to any other cultural identities. By the way, the founder of Republic of Turkey Mustafa Kemal was also a member of this group.

Secondly, the fear of disintegration which led the Ottoman Empire to collapse made new Turkey paranoid about losing its territory. The Ottoman Empire had territory on three continents through the 19th century as a result of nationalism; other nations freed themselves from Ottoman Empire and declared their independences. Therefore, a new Turkey territory squeezed in the Anatolian peninsula. At that time, it was deemed that Kurdish also one day may declare their independence. Thus, the Turkish State has always been afraid of a separate Kurdish identity the core of which

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ B. Oran, *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey. The Linguistic Minority Rights, Kurds and Globalization*, <http://baskinoran.com/makale/The-Kurdish-Conflict-in-Turkey.pdf> [6 March 2012].

⁵ *Ibidem*.

would of course be the Kurdish language⁶. This fear materialized with the 20s and 30s Kurdish uprisings. The first uprising was the Sheikh Said Rebellion and the second one was Dersim Rebellion, the third one would be the PKK.

Sheikh Said Rebellion

The Sheikh Rebellion was the first Kurdish uprising against the new Turkey. In February and March 1925 the young Republic of Turkey was shaken by a revolt of Kurdish peasants that rapidly spread over a vast part of its Eastern province⁷. The rebellion organized by the Azadi group (in Kurdish means freedom) and the Kurdish clergy Sheik has dual character linking religious and ethnic issues.

The religion has always been deeply immersed in the Kurdish society since they accepted the Islam. Even the great number of Kurdish people who based their life on nomadic lifestyle carried the religious values. If one looks at the independence war of Turkish Republican, the people who fought in the war basically fought in the name of caliph, religion and to save the Empire. Moreover, Ataturk himself never mentioned that they would establish the secular Turkey during the war. He was discussing the issue that the Istanbul government was unable to function; therefore a new assembly was needed. On the surface Mustafa Kemal Ataturk accentuated the necessity of an assembly in order to save the Empire and caliph. Therefore, in midst of the Turkish War of Independence on 23 April 1920 in Ankara, the Turkish Assembly was found. After the assembly was established, there were representatives from all parts of Turkey in assembly and with their traditional religious dresses. These people were respected and elected due to their religious affiliation. As Barkey and Fuller stated, "Mustafa Kemal's first speech to the newly gathered parliament in April 1920 argued that the parliament was not composed of the representative of Turks, Kurds, Circassia, and Laz, but rather the representative of a strongly unified Islamic Community"⁸. At that time Ataturk concealed his ideas about religion; he had cryptic plan about religion.

In 1923 the Caliphate was abolished and Turkey became a secular republic. The Kemalist government implemented the policy of the *turkification*, which meant the unity of the state is no longer based on religion but on Turkish nationalism. For modernization of the new republic, Ataturk launched a program of revolutionary social and political reforms. These reforms included the emancipation of women, the abolition of all Islamic institutions and the introduction of Western legal codes, dress, calendar and alphabet, replacing the Arabic script with a Latin one. Kurd felt that abolishing

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ M. Firat, *Doğu illeri ve Varto tarihi (History of the Eastern provinces And of Varto)*, Ankar 1970.

⁸ H.J. Barkey, G. E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, New York 1998.

the Caliphate position left no common good between them and Turkish. The event was conceived by Kurds as *de-Islaminazation* process, and it became one of the arguments for rebellion. Akyol stated that:

On 3 March 1924 Mustafa Kemal abolished the caliphate. This was the real body blow... This cut the last ideological tie Kurds felt with Turks. The closure of the religious schools, the *madrasas and kuttabs*, removed the last remaining source of education for most Kurds. By stripping Turkey of its religious institutions, Mustafa Kemal now made enemies of the very Kurds who had helped Turkey survive the years of trial, 1919-22. These were the religiously-minded, the *shaykhs* and the old *Hamidiyeaghas* who had genuinely believed in the defense of the caliphate. It was among such people, who on the whole had repudiated any previous connection with them, that the Kurdish nationalist resistance⁹.

Sheikh Said legitimized his rebellion by showing the Kurds that the new regime is against both Kurdish identity and religion. Only with his support the Azadi managed to funnel its ideas to Kurdish people. The insurmountable obstacle which had been ahead of *Azadi* was not having a mass support from the Kurds. The group founded in 1923 by Kurdish military officers (who served in the Ottoman and then Turkish armies) and intellectuals¹⁰. Therefore, they were not able to communicate with Kurdish peasants. Moreover, the group was composed mostly by secular nationalists and the founders of *Azadi* included atheists as stated by Bozaslan¹¹. The organization directly contacted with Sheikh Said and revealed their enthusiasm for taking part in the rebellion. The revolt was originally set for May 1925 and would encompass most or all of Turkey's Kurdish provinces¹². Due to the mistakes which were made by the Sheikh Said and his followers led the rebellion commence earlier. By the end of 1924, most of *Azadi's* top leadership had been arrested¹³.

The rebellion despite its weak preparation has conducted some successful operations and captured Elazig (one of the biggest provinces of the east part of Turkey). The Turkish army approximately dispatched 52,000 soldiers, the number of rebellions was around 15,000¹⁴. The most effective and successful operation was conducted by air force bombardments against rebellions. Most of the rebellions were stunned by airplane because they never had seen such a thing. Bombardments created a great

⁹ M. Akyol, *The Origin of Turkey's Kurdish Question. An Outcome of the Breakdown Of Ottoman Ancient Regime*, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/81890706/11/the-post-war-years-and-the-sheikh-said-rebellion> [27 April 2012].

¹⁰ D. Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement. Opportunity Mobilization and Identity*, New York 2006, p. 105.

¹¹ H. Bozaslan, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği ve Kürt Hareketi (Kurdish Nationalism and Kurdish Movement)*, Istanbul 2002, p. 849.

¹² M. Bruinessen, *Religion and Rural Revolt*, U.K., 1984.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ R. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, Texas 1989, p. 229.

panic among the Kurds, most of whom never seen airplanes before¹⁵. In a few violent open battles destroyed the Kurdish forces¹⁶. Later, Sheik Said was captured in Varto, a district of Mus (one of the provinces in eastern Turkey), the person who informed the government to arrest him was his former ally and a relative. After a short trial on 28 June 1925, Shaikh Said was condemned to death and executed by the method of hanging. The result of the rebellion was abominable, within a month; there was a wide range of casualties. In that period over 40, 000 people were killed, mostly civilians¹⁷. However, Kurdish intellectuals claim the casualties were even greater than that.

During the court trial Shaikh Said expressed his disappointment about inability of Kurdish people to unite: „You cannot achieve anything with this people (Kurdish people)... I am done with this people, no one assents to the *sharia* anymore¹⁸. In fact most of Kurdish tribes became neutral and some of them collaborated with the government in order to quell the rebellion. It can be said that only a minority of Turkey's Kurd backed the rebellion. For instance, some of the groups supported the rebellion in the initial stage of the revolt and then shifted their support from Sheik Said towards the government. One of the reasons why the rebellion was not supported by the majority of Kurds was because the rebellion was conducted by the Sunni Zazas, who are minority among Kurds. Their language is slightly different from the language of the majority of Kurds, but they are Kurdish. 50 of the 715 tribes and groups living in the East and Southeast Anatolia joined the rebellion.

With the outbreak the law of *Takrir-i Sükûn Kanunu* (virtually means martial law) was passed. Consequently, the freedom of speech and freedom of expression were infringed. As Nedim stated, „with martial law (*Takrir-i Sükun Yasası*) on March 4, 1925; news papers, including *Aydınlık*, *Sebül Reşat*, *Tevhid-i Efkar*, *Resimli Ay*, and *Vatan*, were closed and several journalists arrested and tried at the Independence Courts¹⁹. This rebellion created a climate of fear which is still present in the perception of both Turkish people and policy makers. The fear is that the Kurds one day may declare their independence. For that reason, the regime's attitude to the Kurdish people changed from the one of ignoring the Kurds to a policy of violence²⁰. The one who stood up to government policy experienced a harsh treatment and tortures. These ill-treatments have impeded the process of democratization of Turkey until now; and it became one of the obstacles for Turkey to enter the European Union. As Bruinessen described that

¹⁵ M. Bruinessen, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ K. Koivunen, *The Invisible War in North Kurdistan*, Helsinki 2002.

¹⁸ M. Akyol, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ S. Nedim, *Censorship of Thought and the Press from Yesterday to Today*, Ankara 2005.

²⁰ B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London 1961.

‘in the process, much of the Turkey’s tenuous democracy was sacrificed²¹. Repression did not prevent Kurds to revolt again in the Dersim Rebellion.

Dersim Rebellion

In 1934 the Resettlement Law aimed to accelerate the *turkification* process was passed that defined three types of resettlement zones²²:

- districts to be evacuated for health, economic, cultural, political and security reasons and where settlement was forbidden;
- districts where the population was to be transferred and resettled for the purposes of assimilation to Turkish culture;
- districts where an increase of the population having “Turkish culture” was recommended.

The systematic assimilation worked out for other minorities groups such as Arabs, Circassia etc. However, the assimilation policy did not pan out for most of the Kurds. Certainly there were some Kurdish who have been successfully assimilated; however, due to the high population of Kurds and the geographical conditions where they settled, it was not as successful as the Turkish government had hoped. Initially, the Kurds opposed the assimilation policy vehemently. Moreover, the Kurdish tribes did not want to lose their power when the new *Kemalist* regime sought to centralize the power over the country. Particularly, Kurds in Dersim region (renamed to Tunceli) bitterly loathed the idea of *turkification* and resented the government’s attempt at enforcing a centralized power on them what sparked a rebellion by the local ethnic minority groups – mainly Kurdish Alevi tribes²³.

Dersim region is unique in regards to its geography. Generally, the Kurdish regions were scattered throughout the country. However, Dersim was a tight-knit community surrounded by mountains, which made it almost impossible to control. Bruinessen described Dersim as an inaccessible district of high, snowcapped mountains, narrow valleys, and deep ravines in central Eastern Turkey. Bruinessen asserts that, „Dersim was, by the mid-1930s, the last part of Turkey that had not been effectively brought under central government control and the tribes of Dersim had never been subdued by any previous government; the only law they recognized was traditional tribal law”²⁴. Due to the geographic makeup of the area the Turkish administration required almost 14 years to prepare to gain control over Dersim.

²¹ M. Bruinessen, *op. cit.*

²² Enotes, *Dersim Massacre*, http://www.enotes.com/topic/Dersim_Massacre [7 April 2012].

²³ C. Soner, *Reconfiguring the Turkish nation in the 1930s.*, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/programs/kokkalis> [1 March 2012].

²⁴ M. Bruinessen, *Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)*, [in:] *Conceptual and historical*

In 1934 the “Law on Administration of the Tunceli Province” (*Tunceli Vilayetinin İdaresi Hakkında Kanun*), no. 2884 and it became law on 25 December 1935 was passed in order to implement the Resettlement Law in Dersim. This law created the Fourth Inspectorate-General (*Dördüncü Umumi Müfettişlik*) that was a kind of a regional governorship that concentrated all the powers of the region in one hand. General Inspectorates were not something that unfamiliar; in fact, they were assigned earlier to the other providences of the Kurdish in order to hasten the *turkification* process. The General Inspectorate (*Umumi Müfettişlikler*) was a regional governorship whose authorities prevailed over civilian, military and judicial institutions under their domain of the direct command of Mustafa Kemal. The whole purpose was to establish authoritarian rule and to consolidate the authority in the process of *Turkification* of religious and ethnic minorities. Therefore, one of the main reasons for General Inspectorates was to gain control over all the regions in order to reduce safe havens for future rebellions. Bulut²⁵ claimed that directly after the *Tunceli Law*, the military observation posts were built by the Turkish government in the center districts.

After consequent preparations the government launched the attack against the rebellion gathered under the commander of Seyid Rıza, the leader of Kurdish Zazas and Dersim Rebellion during the 1937-1938²⁶. Seyid Rıza gained support due to his military achievements during the periods of the Russian-Ottoman war in 1915 and in the Turkish War of Independence in 1919. His grandson, Rüstem Polat protests against portraying him as a traitor in Turkish history. Seyit Rıza lay down his arms and decided to engage in peace negotiations. In mid September of 1937, he was arrested when going for negotiations²⁷. The day after his arrest, he was transferred to the headquarters of the General Inspectorate at Elazığ and hanged in mid November, 1937²⁸. Providing rebels with a lawyer was seen as unnecessary. Because of the rebels’ poor Turkish, they were unable to defend themselves. They spoke very little Turkish, yet they were not given access to an interpreter.

No one could have expected such an appalling repercussion. The way the Turkish government responded to the Dersim Rebellion was an utter fiasco in terms of the human rights violations and casualties. Bruinessen states, “according to Dersimi, many tribesmen are shot to death after surrendering, women and children were locked

dimensions of genocide, ed. G.J. Andreopoulos, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 141-170, http://pdfsbox.com/read?=http://www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/Dersim_rebellion.pdf [18 March 2012].

²⁵ F. Bulut, *Devletin Gözüyle Türkiye’de Kürt İsyanlar (Kurdish rebellions in Turkey, with the point of view of government)*, Istanbul 1991, pp. 214-215.

²⁶ D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, New York 2004, p. 208.

²⁷ A. Kahraman, *Kürt İsyanları (Kurdish Revolts)*, Istanbul 2003, pp. 286-287.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 292-293.

into haystacks and fired [upon]²⁹. McDowall³⁰ claims that '40,000 people were killed'. According to Kurdish sources over 70,000 people were killed³¹. Women and children were also targeted. Bruinessen³² went on to say, „[with] some tribes such [as the] Hozat and Karaca tribes, men, women and children were brought near the military camp outside Hozat and killed by machine gun”.

This intentional slaughter was seen as genocide among Kurds. Due to the great numbers murdered, the incident was caught the attention of the international arena, sparking a debate to whether or not the systematic killing should be considered genocide. In the narrow perspective it seems like genocide; however, there was not a policy of physically destroying the Kurds. As previously mentioned, the policy of the Turkish government was systematic assimilation rather than systematic annihilation of Kurds. However, Dersim experienced both systematic assimilation and a systematic slaughter. Therefore, in the case of Dersim, the term of ethnocide is often employed. Bruinessen³³ claimed that in the Dersim campaign there was a deliberate intent to destroy rebels and potential rebels, and this was part of a general policy directed towards the Kurds as such. Again, this policy is more appropriately termed ethnocide, the destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity. It was expected that the fear would halt any rebellion and the assimilation policy would be successful in short time. After the suppression of the Dersim Rebellion, it appeared that the fear tactic may have worked for a short time. There was no Kurdish Rebellions until late 1970's with emergence of the PKK, which would be so powerful that the government would not be capable of controlling it.

The Kurdish tribes were not eager to lose their status and power. As a result of their disapproval, they revolted under the leadership of Seyit *Riza* against the Turkish Republic. A substantial number of Kurds killed and many others were internally displaced after the conflict. McDowall³⁴ claimed that '40,000 people were killed'. However, according to Kurdish records, over 70,000 people were killed³⁵. The event deeply affected generations and would not be easily forgotten. Although most literature refers to the subsequent action taken by the Kurds in the region as the Dersim rebellion, Dersim did not revolt against the new Turkish Republic until the Turkish administration attacked the region in the name of centralization of power.

²⁹ M. Bruinessen, *Genocide in Kurdistan?...*, p. 3.

³⁰ D. McDowall, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

³¹ See: *To the Attention of the Press Public: Dersim '38'conference*. Available at: <<http://www.pen-kurd.org/almani/haydar/Dersim-PreseerklC3A4rungEnglish.pdf>> [28 March 2012].

³² M. Bruinessen, „*Genocide in Kurdistan?...*”, p. 4.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ D. McDowall, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

³⁵ See: *To the Attention of the Press Public. Dersim 38'conference*, <http://www.pen-kurd.org/almani/haydar/Dersim-PreseerklC3A4rungEnglish.pdf> [28 March 2012].

Kurdistan Workers' Party

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) is the organization was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1974 in Lice, Diyarbakir. The PKK is not like any of the previous uprisings. First of all, the group is organized by an ideologically schema. Initially, the group was Marxist–Leninist and socialist in orientation. The organization's ideology was Kurdish nationalism and revolutionary socialism³⁶. It stood for socialist values, social justice and economic solidarity. It also stood for the empowerment of women. At the beginning, the PKK was a secular insurgent political act and worked with other ethnic groups.

More than 40,000 people have died since fighting between the group and Turkey started in 1984. Originally, the PKK's goal was to create an independent Kurdish state called Kurdistan. Kurdistan refers to parts of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran and northern Syria. However, currently the PKK has given up the idea of creating an independent Kurdish state. Tahiri³⁷ states that "this goal has now been moderated to claiming cultural and political rights for the ethnic Kurdish population in Turkey".

The PKK is still listed as a terrorist organization internationally by a number of states and organizations, including the United States. However, the PKK leader said in an interview that the only reason they have been put on the 'terrorist organization' list is due to the political and economic interest of Turkey with the western nations. Many tactics have been used to demonize the organization, including making up false stories.

History of the Kurdistan Workers' Party

In the beginning of the 1970s, the PKK consisted mostly of students led by Abdullah Öcalan in Ankara. Later, the group gained traction and spread over the south-east of Turkey. On November 27, 1978 the group adopted the name "Kurdistan Workers Party". The 1980 Turkish *coup d'état* pushed the organization to another stage that meant jail time and capital punishment to its members. Many fled to Syria.

In 1984, the group organized itself more effectively and using the training camps which were located in Syria and launched attacks against governmental installations and military targets. With collapse of Communism, the organization lost the upper hand in its operations. It began to shift from conventional bombing to suicide bombing and launched more than 14 attacks of which mostly were performed by a female. Öcalan was captured in 1999, sentenced to death, but later his sentence was

³⁶ A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings. The Roots of Civilization*, Istanbul 2007, pp. 243-277.

³⁷ H. Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society and the Struggle for a Kurdish State*, Costa Mesa, California 2007, p. 232.

commuted to life imprisonment³⁸. Moreover, the Turkish parliament's approach was changed in 2002 when the current government, Justice and Development Party or AKP, came to the power. The new authority started using the term „normalization” or “rapprochement”. The ban on broadcasting was lifted in the 2000s; the publishing component of the 1983 ban on the use of Kurdish language had already been lifted in 1991³⁹. However, at the same time, the organization was blacklisted in many countries. The Council of the European Union added the PKK to its list of terrorist organizations in 2003. Later the U.S. added the organization to its list of terrorist organization. BBC stated that „the organization went through a series of changes and the unilateral truce declared by the organization ended in 2003”⁴⁰.

Syria, the PLO and Training Camps

The PKK first used the Bekaa Valley (which was then under Syrian control) as a training camp. Both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Syria contributed aid to the organization for its basic needs and for establishing the camp there. The PLO perceived the PKK as a kindred group, as they seemed to share the same destiny; both were struggling for the independence of their homeland. Therefore, in the beginning, the PLO supported the PKK as a matter of ideological faith. The Syrian support was political. The Syrian and Turkish conflict over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers helped sway Syria to actively support the PKK. The Euphrates is one of the longest rivers in Western Asia. Not only for being the longest river in the region but also for its historical importance. Tigris and Euphrates, these are rivers which determine the demarcation of Mesopotamia.

The Southern Anatolian Project (*Güney Anadolı Projesi*, GAP), or the GAP was structured in the 1970s in order to produce hydraulic energy and irrigation. The project created an enormous tension between Syria and Turkey. Syria demanded more water to be released, while Turkey declined stating that it needed the water for its dammed reservoirs. Due to this conflict between Syrian and Turkey, Syria supported the PKK as a political instrument against Turkey. Thus, for years Syria provided a safe haven to the organization from where they could launch attacks on Turkey. However, after intense pressure from Turkey, in 1998 Syria expelled Öcalan and shut down camps which had been established in the regions. After being expelled, the organization moved to Northern Iraq.

³⁸ See: *Death penalty abolished in Turkey*, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-courier/archives/> [4 May 2012].

³⁹ F. Ibrahim, G. Gurbey, *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey. Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, New York 2000.

⁴⁰ See: *Kurdish rebels abandon truce*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3200907.stm> [4 April 2012].

In Northern Iraq the organization established many training camps instead one single training camp. The organization established its camps in the Qandil Mountains, a mountainous area of northern Iraq, near the Iran-Iraq border, which is very difficult to access.

Political representation

Within the Grand National Assembly of Turkey at the beginning of 1990s, the organization had sympathizer parties. The first sympathizer was the People's Labor Party (*Emek Halk Partisi*, HEP) founded on 7 June 1990. The second one was the Democracy Party (*Democrasi Partisi*, DEP), mostly consisting of members from HEP, it was founded in May 1993. The third party was People's Democracy Party (*Halkin Democrasi Partisi*, HADEP); it was founded by Murat Bozlak in May 1994, but most of the members came from the DEP. The fourth one was Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP); it was founded in October 1997 – the largest majority of members were from the DEP. The next sympathetic party to be formed was the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP); it was founded in 2005, as the merger of DEHAP and the Democratic Society Movement (DTH). The last of the parties (and current one) is the Peace and Democracy Party (*Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP); it was founded in 2010.

Diyarbakir Prison

Over the past 18 years, pro-Kurdish politicians have had to create six different political parties. As each party was banned, another party was founded. The members of these parties faced persecution; most were imprisoned and/or banned from the political sphere. All of them were accused for the same reason: being affiliated with the PKK despite not having participated in any illegal act. The fact is that pro-Kurdish politicians have a completely different definition and perception of terrorism than the Turkish Government does. They do not perceive the PKK's members as terrorists, but rather as victims of government policy. They assert that as the violations of Kurdish rights accumulated, they left no choice for the Kurdish youths but the PKK. These violations included: deprivation of political rights, economic disparities between Kurdish and Turkish regions, political and cultural rights; a continued assimilation policy, which was introduced with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey; and most importantly the torture, ill treatment and turkification policy in Diyarbakir Prison following the Turkish *coup d'état* of 12 September 1980.

The horrible consequences of the tortures and the continuation of the turkification policy in Diyarbakir Prison left young Kurds no option but to take revenge on the Turkish government. Vengeance and loathing accelerated Kurdish nationalism and

radicalism; as a result, it pushed the prisoners and their relatives who were affected to join the PKK.

The reason for the September 12th *coup* was provoked by what the military regarded as an attack on the core *Kemalist* values of national and territorial integrity by subversive leftist and movements of Kurdish nationalism⁴¹.

The Turkish government had always perceived the Kurdish as the biggest threat towards the territorial integrity of Turkey. And it is no coincidence that the 1980 *coup* viewed the Kurdish regions as the biggest threat. It was no accident that one of the main purposes of the *coup* was to accelerate the turkification process. The Kurds were forced to speak Turkish and memorize Turkish national songs in the prisons. Since most of the Kurdish prisoners could not speak Turkish, it was extremely hard for them to memorize so many songs by heart. A Kurdish politician and former prisoner, Nafiz Kaleli, explains:

What we were forced to do aimed at destroying our personalities. Despite us not being Turks, they used to make us shout “I am a Turk, I am right”. I think they made us learn 50 to 60 nationalist songs by heart. It might have been more. These songs are nothing you would sing in your daily life. When you consider the limits of the human memory, learning this amount of songs by heart is very difficult. There is not a worse way of torturing, especially when you consider the fact that some of these people were illiterate. A person is already under the pressure of facing torture that will be impossible to endure [unless] these songs are learnt by heart. You get the truncheon even when you know them by heart, at least hundred times⁴².

Torture is generally used as a mechanism of a state in order to maintain control over populations and to gain information from a person without killing him. Chiefly, torture is not conducted on members of the dominant political parties. Zeydanlıoğlu⁴³ goes on to say, ‘when victims are citizens of the state that carries out the torture, they are often not members of the dominant political, ethnic or religious community in that society; indeed, the victim’s ethno-religious or political identity may be the very reason they are targeted’.

Diyarbakir Prison is famous for mass torture which was conducted during the Turkish *coup d’État*. The Prison was built in 1980 as an E-type prison by the ministry of justice. After the *coup d’État*, it became a Martial Law Military Prison. Prisoners were subjected to unspeakable treatment behind its walls. Most of the prisoners were Kurdish politicians who had been banned from the political sphere. The prison was custody to both male and female prisoners. Amnesty International reported:

⁴¹ W. Zeydanlıoğlu, *Torture and Turkification in the Diyarbakir Military Prison*, See: <http://welatzeydanlioglu.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/torture-and-turkification-in-the-diyarbakir-military-prison.pdf> [15 April 2012].

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

Immediately after the *coup*, the number of political killings increased substantially and the level of human rights abuses increased dramatically. Tens of thousands of men and women were taken into custody. More than 30,000 were jailed in the first four months after the *coup*. During the following years, Amnesty International received thousands of allegations of torture including reports of over 100 deaths as a result of torture. Trade unionists were arrested en masse⁴⁴.

There were several important Kurdish politicians and intellectuals who were imprisoned in Diyarbakir prison. Among them were Ahmet Turk of the Democratic Society Party (DTP); Nurettin Yilmaz former member of DTP; Mehdi Zana, former mayor of Diyarbakir province (also the husband of Leyla Zana, an important Kurdish politician who was imprisoned for 10 years and was later awarded the Shakhrow Prize by the European Parliament); Orhan Miroglu, columnist and an author; and Kurdish poet Yilmaz Odabaşı. Additionally, the current deputy of BDP Altan Tan's father Bedri Tan was tortured to death in Diyarbakir prison.

Diyabakir Prison was listed as one of the world's 10 worst prisons by „The Times”. Smashing Lists⁴⁵ ranked it as the 4th worst out of 10 and called the prison “the wishful hell of Turkey”. In Turkey, a quarter of a million people were arrested on political grounds beginning in 1980 and almost all of them were tortured. In 1986, the Human Rights Association (HRA) set the figure at 650,000. However, in 2008 the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT) spoke of one million victims of torture in Turkey⁴⁶.

The torture during the *coup d'état* accelerated. It was a climate of fear and the degradation of humanity. There was no rule of law or moral scruples. The military could do anything it wished. The military utilized their immense power of coercion to ensure that prisoners would not dare contradict their ideological notions. In other words, the military used torture to manipulate the entire Turkish society in order to maintain control and justified the means to the end. Although some tried, most people could not fight back against the regime, and were subsequently killed while being tortured. The torture methods included electric shocks applied by field telephones, various forms of hanging, *falaka* (foot whipping), rape, sleep and food deprivation and torturing relatives in the presence of the suspect (Osman n.d.). According to the HRFT there were estimated to be around 37 torture techniques. The most utilized torture techniques, they state, were: electric shock, squeezing the testicles, blindfolding, hanging by the arms or legs, stripping the suspect naked, spraying with high-pressure

⁴⁴ *The AI report Turkey. Deaths in Custody*, http://ob.nubati.net/wiki/Illustrated_Reports_of_Amnesty_International [2 April 2012].

⁴⁵ See: Smashing List, n.d., *Worst – Prison – World*, <http://www.smashinglists.com/worst-prisons-world> [11 April 2012].

⁴⁶ E. Ustundag, *TİHV, İşkence Atlası'nı Yayınladı (HRFT publishes Torture Atlas, article in Turkish)*, <http://bianet.org/biamag/toplum/106521-tihv-iskence-atlasini-yayinladi> [21 April 2012].

water, etc. However, thankfully, and as reported by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, ‘the most severe methods of ill-treatment encountered in the past by CPT (Convention for the Prevention of Torture) delegations has diminished in recent times⁴⁷. Diminished, but perhaps not ended.

International organizations such Amnesty International tried to pressure the Turkish government to halt all tortures and release the prisoners. For instance, between September and October 1984, 110 cases were submitted to the Turkish authorities by Amnesty International. In June 1988 AI sent a list with 223 names to the Turkish authorities and September 1998 received answers on 55 cases. The remaining cases which were not sent to AI were suspected to have died under torture. HRFT in September 1994 and September 1995 published two reports on Deaths in Custody and, presenting a list of 419 deaths in custody (in 15 years), claimed that torture might have been the reason.

Mazlum Dogan

A lot of prisoners went on hunger-strikes and subsequently died. And there were some who burned themselves; often they were the founders of the PKK who engaged in self-immolation as a way to protest the Turkish Government and the prison conditions. Mazlum Dogan was one of the pioneers who chose that road. He was an educated man who had passed the university entrance exam in 1974 and gained the right to enroll at Hacetepe University in Ankara, which was one of the best universities in Turkey. In the university he immersed himself in reading. Those who knew him closely indicated that he was a fervent reader (reading up to 500 pages a day), and was interested in both domestic and world affairs. In a TV interview, his mother explained that he lived for all of humanity not just for the Kurds.

University life changed his life dramatically, especially after meeting other Kurds who familiarized him with politics. It wasn't long before he became one of the members of the Central Committee of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. At first, he joined the Kurdish student movement and then he went on to join the PKK. In 1979, he took a trip to Urfa, one of the southeastern provinces of Turkey, to encourage the Kurds there to fight for their political rights. He was promptly arrested alongside thousands of other Kurds. After being accused of leading a terrorist organization, he was sent to Diyarbakir Prison. Almost every day for three years he was tortured and beaten. Although the prison authorities tried to force him to sing the Turkish national anthem, he always refused, and subsequently received worse treatment than other prisoners

⁴⁷ See: *Report to the Turkish Government on the Vvisit to Turkey Carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 16 to 24 July 2000*, <http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/tur/2001-25-inf-eng.htm> [10 April 2012].

who had acquiesced. The constant torture and psychological abuse led him to devise a way to liberate himself forever and bring some attention to the prison's deplorable conditions. On March 21, 1982, *Newroz* day, rather than lighting a bonfire and dancing around it to welcome the Spring as was Kurdish tradition, Mazlum chose, instead, to light up his own cell. He chose to burn to death to escape from the Turkish torture he had been undergoing⁴⁸.

His death was not in vain. The world outside of the prison became aware of the prison conditions and mass tortures. The use of torture began to decline some due to this newfound awareness. However, hunger strikes and suicides increased drastically. After the death of Mazlum, other members of the PKK including: Ferhat Kurtay, Eşref Anyık, Necmi Öner and Mahmut Zengin followed Mazlum's example and killed themselves by setting their cells on fire.

The Diyarbakir Prison: Kurdish Nationalism and the PKK

As mentioned earlier, a large majority of the prisoners in Diyarbakir prison were either Kurdish or prisoners of conscious. The rash of suicides affected them greatly. Rather than accepting the ideology of the time, many prisoners began to look into the PKK and what it stood for; many came to the conclusion that the PKK was on the right side of this issue.

Despite the rampant torture and the deplorable conditions, Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish radicalism began to increase at Diyarbakir Prison. The Kurds who were tortured and their relatives who were affected by it were easily recruited into the PKK. These new recruits helped the organization thrive, and thereby nationalized the arm struggle with the mission of creating an independent Kurdish State. Former prisoner of Diyarbakir prison Selim Dindar explained it this way:

I am not a political person. I am not very well informed in such issues. But 12 September made everyone aware of the Kurdish question and brought it to the world's attention. Had it not been for the barbarity in the prison, the Kurdish question would not have emerged so soon. They made militants out of people in the Diyarbakir prison. Almost 80 percent of these people went to the mountains [and took up arms]. It was very difficult for someone to pursue a normal life after having experienced such brutality. You know, it is said that 'the PKK movement exploded in 1984', this date is when many people were released from the Diyarbakir prison⁴⁹.

To conclude, the torture in Diyarbakir prison was meant to be a way to control the Kurdish nationalism and to accelerate the turkification policy of the government which had been set policy since the founding of the Republic of Turkey. However, as we learned, the policies of torture and intimidation backfired. The policy had a reverse

⁴⁸ See: *Kurdish Heroes, 2012. Mazlum Dogan*, <http://medlem.spray.se/kurdishheroes/Mazlum-Dogan.html> [10 April 2012].

⁴⁹ W. Zeydanlioğlu, *op. cit.*

impact on the Kurds; instead of turkification, Kurdish nationalism and radicalism gained momentum.

A Brief History of Kurdish Movement and Link between the PKK; and Why the PKK Have Been So Important of Kurdish Movement?

Until the end of the First World War (1918), Kurds had been living in territories belonging to both the Ottoman and Persian Empires. The central Persian and Ottoman leaders used to make deals with feudal leaders in order to keep them faithful. This way they assured tax income for their realms and were able to control any possible revolts.

After 1918, the Kurds mobilized in order to create a national state (1920 – Treaty of Sevres). After the treaty, Mustafa Kemal, a former army general, successfully began a great national movement in Turkey, which in short time forced the European powers to ratify a new Treaty in Lausanne, establishing the Republic of Turkey, and undermining the possibility of a Kurdish state. Moreover, the treaty divided the Kurds into four national states; some parts remained under the control of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Kurds were subsequently subjected to a denial of their identity and culture rights.

Several uprisings occurred on Kurdish territories, as mentioned earlier; however, the strongest one to date has been led by the PKK. There are many reasons why the PKK has become a powerful organization but one stands out: the people's support. This support soared after the PKK launched the war on Turkey.

Village guards system (*Koy Koruculari*)

After the war, the Turkish state established a number of military posts at strategic locations in the Kurdish regions. By 1982, two thirds of the Turkish army was deployed to the southeast of Turkey to halt the separatist movement⁵⁰. Forced evacuations and village destruction started; the Turkish government justified its action by saying that those targeted villages were providing safe haven to the PKK. More than 3,000 villages and hamlets in Kurdish region have been evacuated since 1984 when the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) launched an armed struggle, and 3 million Kurds have been displaced from their settlements. However, villages were not evacuated if only they agreed to collaborate with the government to combat the PKK. Therefore, the Turkish government introduced *Koy Koruculari* (Village guard system). The reason behind this idea was to set up of the system that would be helpful to the Turkish Army to have an additional force who knew the region and the language and who would assist in military operations against the PKK⁵¹. In other words, it was an idea to kill Kurds

⁵⁰ See: *Scientists with the State in Turkey. For Case Studies*, <http://shr.aas.org/scws/context.htm> [2 May 2012].

⁵¹ E. Balta, *Causes and Consequences of the Village Guard System in Turkey*, <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/rbins/iucsha/fellows/Balta-paper.pdf> [10 May 2012].

using Kurds in order to impede the solidarity of Kurdish movement. Sometimes village guards dressed up as PKK insurgents engaging in false-flag attacks in order to arouse animosity among Kurds⁵². The village guards were involved in a wide range of illegal activities, including drug smuggling, extortion and killing⁵³. It is estimated that 296 killings were committed by village guards from 1985 to 1996; in a subsequent report in 2006, the Interior Ministry indicated that some 5,000 village guards were involved in criminal activities⁵⁴.

Human rights violations committed by Village Guards (1990-2002)*	
Burning of Villages	: 38
Evacuation of Villages	: 14
Rape	: 12
Abduction	: 22
Armed Attack	: 294
Wounded as a result of armed attack	: 176
Deaths as a result of armed attack	: 132
Disappearances	: 2
Summary Executions	: 50
Torture	: 454
Arrest	: 59
Suicides	: 9
Burning Forests	: 17

* – E. Balta, *op. cit.*

Moreover, the Turkish government has used the village guards for distinguishing „loyal” and „disloyal” citizens and provided so-called loyal villagers with material goods. A village guard could expect to be paid up to \$200 per month⁵⁵.

The Fear – Generated Hysteria State

The fear-generated hysteria state, killed hundreds politicians, journalists, activists and other supporters of the Kurdish movement; and imprisoned thousands of Kurds who were arbitrarily arrested and then subjected to extremely unthinkable of torture. The people who were released from the jails joined the PKK and conducted the most successful operations against the Turkish state. To a large extent, the Turkish authority has not been allowing PKK sympathizers use legal tools of politics. Therefore, the government can be faulted for indirectly escalating the violence and radicalism.

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ See: *Turkey and War in Iraq. Avoiding Past Patterns of Violation*, http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/turkey/turkey_violations.htm [1 March 2012].

⁵⁴ See: *Opposition Ambivalent As Gov't Rallies to Solve the Kurdish Issue*, <http://www.today-szaman.com/news-182728-opposition-ambivalent-as-govt-rallies-to-solve-kurdish-issue.html> [1 May 2012].

⁵⁵ *Scientists with the Sate in Turkey...*

Furthermore, there are some important Turkish figures, Ahmet Altan, for example, who do not think that the PKK is a terrorist organization. They think like most Kurdish politicians. They believe that the government's false policies have exacerbated the issue. Thus, the Kurdish issue has become more tangled than ever. They argue that the assimilation failed as it did not help the Kurds at all but instead ruined the lives of thousands. They say a huge amount of money was spent but no result was seen. They argue that instead of assimilation and fighting with the PKK, the Turkish government should recognize the cultural autonomy and collective rights of Kurds in Turkey. If the government does not recognize the rights of the Kurdish people, Turkey can never be a stable country.

Ahmet Altan, a famous Turkish author and Editor-in-Chief and lead columnist of *Taraf* (one of the most famous newspapers in Turkey) strongly supports the above ideas. As Altan⁵⁶ stated in his column, „the army [has been fighting] against the PKK for twenty-five years. What is the result? Thousands of dead, hundreds of millions of dollars spent; and the Kurdish question remains unsolved in front of society; moreover, the PKK continues its existence in the mountains”.

Conclusion

In this study, the author to familiarize the reader with the root causes of Turkey's Kurdish issue though not every possible causes could be introduced. However, there are some which hold more weight and seem to add more significantly to causation. In Turkey's Kurdish issues, the Sheik Said Rebellion, Dersim Rebellion, and the PKK are the most significant reactionary attitudes towards the policies of the Turkish government. Although they differ in many cases, they all agree when it comes to Kurdish nationalism. They all had a desire of establishing an independent Kurdish state. However, Kurdish nationalism differs from any other nationalism movement in the 20th century. A large majority of Kurds have never been eager to establish an independent state. This can be seen during the last era of Ottoman Empire: due to nationalist movements, all nations which were under domination of the Ottoman Empire (including a great portion of the Islamic world) strove and sought to create independent states. Only one nation collaborated with the Turks – the Kurds. During the Turkish War of Independence, Kurds played an indispensable role. After the war, the founding fathers of Turkey betrayed the Kurds; they sacrificed them in the name of nationalism. Rather than increasing Kurdish rights, the new Turkish government infringed even on rights that Kurds had previously enjoyed under the domination of the Ottoman Empire. With the introduction of the turkification policy, the centralization

⁵⁶ A. Altan, *Newruz, Kemalism and Religion*, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/ahmet-altan/makale-nevruz-kemalizm-ve-din.htm> [1 May 2012].

of power and the abolishment of most religious institutions by the founding fathers of new Republic of Turkey, there was no common good left holding the two nations together. The Kurds disliked these policies. Therefore, since at the beginning of the new Republic of Turkey the resistance was formed including the PKK.

For more than 30 years both the PKK and the Turkish government created the cyber-world which does not exist in this world. If the Turkish government still tries to extinguish the PKK, the fighting will continue for decades to come. Firstly, it is impossible to extinguish the PKK with arms. Secondly, even if the PKK is extinguished, the Kurdish issue would not be solved. The organization would be replaced by a new one. The problem is the usurpation of the rights of Kurds. If the Turks perceive themselves as superior and hold the power of all decisions, the violence will remain. The Kurdish question cannot be reduced to a terrorist question by calling the PKK a terrorist organization and placing all responsibility for subsequent violence onto the PKK. The Kurds and the Turks have to show a genuine concern about the issue. They need to devise ways to solve the problem. They need to create an environment where everybody can feel like 'first-class' citizens; where everyone can feel that they are all the owner of the state, not only one side. As Altan⁵⁷ stated, „this is the only alternative solution for both sides”.

The PKK has been the biggest problem in Turkey for the past 30 years. Many attempts have been taken in order to annihilate the organization; however, the Turkish government has not been able to succeed. Their way of approaching the 'Kurdish problem' has been a fiasco. They continue to approach the problem in a narrow way rather than in a broad way. Policy makers of Turkey do not take into account that the PKK is inextricably linked to the Kurdish people. Altan⁵⁸ remarked that the Turkish view of the PKK and the Kurdish view of the PKK are very different; some Kurds perceive the PKK as a 'holy' organization. Moreover, the Turkish government has imprisoned and tortured many Kurds, and has thus turned the people in the prison into hardcore militants. The government has been using disproportionate force against the Kurdish civilians whom the government considers a potential problem, and, as it is known, violence breeds violence. The Turkish government has been using only one way to solve the problem-violence. The Turkish authorities should keep in mind that using violence should be the last resort. The PKK and the Kurdish issue in Turkey is so unified that segmentation will again lead to failure. To make a long story short, the Kurdish problem led to the creation of the PKK. Therefore, Turkey should solve the Kurdish problem, non-violently, with diplomacy and then the PKK will evaporate.

To sum up, the Kurdish issue in Turkey has become an obstacle to both Turks and Kurds. Everyone has suffered from the conflict, and everyone wants the issue to be

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*

resolved. However, the long denial policy of Kurds and the turkification policy have created an insurmountable problem; there is no common denominator for solving this issue. The reality is that this issue has to be solved. Since the recent Arab Spring, Turkey has been pointed to as a country which Arab countries may look for inspiration. However, this unsolved Kurdish issue in Turkey undermines Turkey's credibility to offer wisdom and help to others⁵⁹.

Narodziny i rozwój kwestii kurdyjskiej w Turcji

Streszczenie

Kurdowie od wieków walczyli o niepodległe państwo. W XX w. udało im się kilkakrotnie zaistnieć na arenie międzynarodowej, ale w procesie długofalowym przegrywali z silniejszymi i musieli prowadzić wieloletnie walki powstańcze w górach. Ważnym aspektem kurdyjskiego ruchu narodowościowego w Turcji było powstanie Partii Pracujących Kurdystanu (PKK) Abdullaha Öcalana. Prowadziła ona często brutalną politykę, walcząc z armią turecką, uciekając się do zamachów terrorystycznych. Przez wielu uważana jest za organizację terrorystyczną (np. znajduje się na oficjalnej liście organizacji terrorystycznych publikowanej przez Sekretarza Stanu USA), ale dla większości Kurdów nią nie jest. Znani tureccy publicyści jako Ahmet Aslan podważają współcześnie sens tej długiej wojny domowej, uważając, że nie przynosi rezultatów.

⁵⁹ I. Turan, *Easier Said Than Done. Turkey Tries To Cope With Its Kurdish Problem*, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/files_mf/1323288154_magicfields_attachment__1_1.pdf [3 May 2012].