

Turkey's Kurdish Insurgency Reappraised (Part I)

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Abstract

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As the modern Republic of Turkey—officially established on 29 October 1923—enters its second century and crucial national elections for president and parliament were held on 14 and 28 May 2023 in which the Kurds played a crucial role, this is a particularly important time to reappraise the country's long-continuing Kurdish insurgency and related events. Over the years, two over-arching, seemingly contradictory themes involving change and continuity have characterized Turkey's policy toward the Kurds. During Ottoman times (1261-1923) and even into the early Republican days (1923-), the Kurds were granted a type of separate status befitting their unique ethnic identity. However, probably largely because of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, Kemalist Turkey abruptly cancelled this policy and instead initiated one of

denial, assimilation, and force. The fear was that the Kurds would potentially challenge Turkey's newly established territorial integrity and divide the state. Only gradually beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, when this position of, denial, assimilation, and the fist had clearly failed, did Turkey cautiously and incrementally begin again reversing its policy and granting the Kurds some type of recognition. Thus this article also will cover the PKK insurgency, as well as Abdullab (Apo) Ocalan's capture and its consequences. Subsequently, Part II of this reappraisal will bring events up to the present in 2024.

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Introduction

As the modern Republic of Turkey—officially established on 29 October 1923—enters its second century and crucial national elections for president and parliament were held on 14 and 28 May 2023 in which the Kurds played a crucial role,³ this is a particularly important time to reappraise the country's long-continuing Kurdish insurgency and related events. Indeed, more than half of the Kurds in the world live in Turkey. However, they are anything but homogeneous in their goals ranging from those who seek assimilation into the broader Turkish society to those seeking outright independence. Most probably would like to remain in Turkey but with guaranteed political, social, and cultural rights as Kurds.

Over the years, two over-arching, seemingly contradictory themes involving change and continuity have characterized Turkey's policy toward the Kurds. During Ottoman times (1261-1923) and even into the early Republican days (1923-), the Kurds were granted a type of separate status befitting their unique ethnic identity. However, probably because of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, Kemalist Turkey abruptly cancelled this policy and instead initiated one of denial, assimilation, and force. Indeed, even in Turkish foreign policy, the Saadabad Treaty of 1937 with Iran and Iraq as well as the Baghdad Pact in 1955 with those two states plus Great Britain and Pakistan had in part the purpose of mutual cooperation in keeping the potentially volatile Kurdish issue quiet. The fear was that the Kurds would potentially challenge Turkey's territorial integrity and divide the state.

³ "Turkey's Kingmaking Kurds," *The Economist*, April 8, 2023, pp. 42-43. The pro-Kurdish HDP supported the 6-Party Nation Alliance led by Kemal Kilicdaroglu seeking to defeat the AKP-MHP People's Alliance headed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The polls showed a very close election with the HDP holding approximately 10 percent of the vote, a crucial figure. However, since the HDP was in danger of being closed down for alleged association with the insurgent Kurdish PKK, the HDP campaigned as the Green Leaf Party. After the May 2023 elections, the HDP changed its name to *Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi* (HEDEP) or Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party. However, this new, pro-Kurdish replacement party's abbreviation was rejected by Turkey's Court of Appeals on account of its similarity to the previously banned pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HADEP). Therefore, the new pro-Kurdish party took the abbreviation DEM Party. See below for further details.



Only gradually beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, when this position of denial, assimilation, and the first had clearly failed, did Turkey cautiously and incrementally begin again reversing its policy and granting the Kurds some type of recognition. Turgut Ozal's domestic and external proposals for Kurdish rights in the 1980s dealing with language rights, help for the Iraqi Kurds, and possible willingness to discuss federalism if only to refute it, among others—although followed by Suleyman Demirel, Tansu Ciller, Bulent Ecevit, and Ahmet Sezer's sterile return to what was essentially denialism—adumbrated Recep Tayyip Erdogan's initial domestic Kurdish Opening with its accompanying peace process between the state and the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK) or Kurdistan Workers Party as well as external de facto alliance with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq returned Turkey to a policy of change. However, when this policy of change and accommodation had failed by the summer of 2015, Erdogan returned to a policy of war and denial. Many believe that if Erdogan had lost his bid for reelection in May 2023, the new government, with Kurdish backing, would have returned to a policy of change and accommodation.

However, this will be difficult because even behind Ozal's and Erdogan's initial policy of change remained one of continuity, in which the state continues to see the Kurdish problem as one of security, while the Kurds view it as one of achieving human rights and democracy. In other words, Turkey basically offers changes to maintain state security and its territorial integrity, not to implement change for the primary sake of Kurdish rights and democracy. In addition, the sudden explosion of the Kurdish problem in Syria due to the anarchy the civil war has created there since 2011 has presented Turkey with a whole new dimension of the Kurdish security problem at the same time Turkey is supposedly trying to implement change in its Kurdish dealings. The purpose of this article is to reappraise Turkey's Kurdish policy in light of these two seemingly contradictory, but related themes of continuity and change.

Ottoman Times

During Ottoman times, the state usually recognized the separate Kurdish existence and even referred to their historical homeland as Kurdistan, a geographical term that went down the memory hole in modern Turkey in favor of the designation eastern Turkey or simply the East. However, the term Kurdistan had presented no problem for the multi-national Ottoman Empire, especially since the Kurds were largely fellow Sunni Muslims, had only a very stunted sense of separate nationalism, and were still living in a largely pre-modern, undeveloped condition. What sense of identification the Kurds had was owed on the larger dimension to Islam and on the smaller level to the tribes.⁴

In 1891, Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II created the *Hamidiye*, a modern pro-government Kurdish cavalry that proved to be an important stage in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism.⁵ Nevertheless, most of the Kurds supported the Ottomans in World War I and Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) during the Turkish War of Independence following that conflict.

During World War I, one of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points (Number 12) declared that the non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire should be granted the right of "autonomous development." The stillborn Treaty of Sevres signed in August 1920 provided for "local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish area." (Article 62) and in Article 64 even looked forward to the possibility that "the Kurdish peoples" might be granted "independence from Turkey." Turkey's quick revival under Ataturk—ironically enough with considerable Kurdish help as the Turks played well on the theme of Islamic unity—altered the entire situation. The subsequent and definitive Treaty of Lausanne in July

⁴ On why Kurdish nationalism presented such a minimal threat in Ottoman times, see Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), p. 117; and Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 24.

⁵ For background, see Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).



1923 recognized the modern Republic of Turkey without any special provisions for the Turkish Kurds. The path was open to change state policy toward denial, assimilation, and the fist.

The Kemalist Change of Denial and Assimilation

When Mustafa Kemal first began to create the new Republic of Turkey, it was not clear what constituted a Turk.⁶ Indeed, in appealing for unity against the Greek and Armenian invaders immediately after World War I, Ismet (Inonu)—Ataturk's famous lieutenant and eventual successor—initially spoke of the new state as being a “homeland for Kurds and Turks.”⁷ Kurdish troops played an indispensable role in the over-all Nationalist victory. The Nationalist parliament in Ankara included some 75 Kurdish deputies. For a while Mustafa Kemal apparently even toyed with the idea of meaningful Kurdish autonomy in the new state. The minutes of the Amasya interview and the proceedings of the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses in 1919, as well as two other occurrences in 1922 and 1923, make this clear.⁸ Kurdish autonomy, however, proved to be the road not taken.

Shortly after the Nationalist victory, a series of steps were taken in an attempt to eliminate the Kurdish presence in the new Republic of Turkey through legal proclamation and gradual assimilation. On 3 March 1924, for example, a decree banned all Kurdish schools, organizations, and publications, as well as religious fraternities and *medressehs* (Islamic religious schools), which were the last source of education for most Kurds. The Sheikh Said rebellion⁹ in 1925 sealed

⁶ On this point, see Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-5.

⁷ Ismet Cheriff Vanly, *Le Kurdistan irakien: entité nationale* (Neuchâtel: Editions de La Baconnière, 1970), p. 54; as cited in George S. Harris, “Ethnic Conflict and the Kurds,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 433 (September 1977), p. 115.

⁸ See Ismet G. Imset, “The PKK: Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?” *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 10 (nos. 1 & 2; 1996), p. 53; and Robert Olson, “Kurds and Turks: Two Documents Concerning Kurdish Autonomy in 1922 and 1923,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 15 (Winter 1991), pp. 20-31.

⁹ For background, see Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); and Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 265-305.

this determination. In an attempt to dilute and assimilate the Kurdish population, Kurdish deportations to the west were initiated. Only the sheer impossibility of fully carrying out such a task prevented its fulfillment. The Kurdish areas in the southeast were declared a military zone forbidden to foreigners until 1965. In 1928, the entire civil and military administration of the Kurdish provinces in the east was placed under an Inspector-General of the East. Subsequently, regimes of martial law, state of siege, and state of emergency complete with a supra-governor were instated. Given the Kemalist insistence on a unitary framework for the Turkish government, these special measures were ironic, since they in effect placed the Kurdish provinces under a special administration.

After another major Kurdish rebellion around Mount Ararat was finally crushed in 1930, further deportations followed. Law No. 2510 in June 1934 sought to disperse the Kurdish population to areas where it would constitute no more than 5 percent of the total. It was even suggested that Kurdish children be sent to boarding schools where they would speak exclusively in Turkish. Only the lack of state resources and the sheer size of the growing Kurdish population defeated the intention. Nevertheless, an extreme form of Turkish nationalism with its associated historical myths developed that had no place for Kurdish ethnic awareness.

The Turkish Historical Thesis claimed that all the world's civilizations had been founded by the Turks, while the so-called Sun-Language Theory held that all languages derived from one original tongue spoken in central Asia. Turkish, the closest extant descendant of this primeval language, was the source from which all other languages had developed. Isolated in their mountain fastnesses, the Kurds had simply forgotten their mother tongue. The Kurdish language supposedly contained fewer than some 800 words and thus was not a real language. Indeed, the very word "Kurd" was declared to be nothing more than a corruption of the crunching sound (kirt, kart, or kurt) one made while walking through the snow-covered mountains in the southeast. The much-abused and criticized



appellation “Mountain Turks” when referring to the ethnic Kurds in Turkey served as a code term for these actions.

During the 1960s, Turkish president Cemal Gursel lauded a book written by Sherif Firat that claimed that the Kurds were Turkish in origin, and helped to popularize the phrase “spit in the face of he who calls you a Kurd” as a way to make the word “Kurd” an insult.¹⁰ At the same time, Law No. 1587 furthered the process of changing Kurdish names, “which hurt public opinion and are not suitable for our national culture, moral values, traditions and customs,” into Turkish names. As recently as 1995, the Turkish government suddenly announced that the Kurdish new year’s holiday *Newroz* was in fact a Turkish holiday commemorating the day that the Turks first left their ancestral Asian homeland, Ergenekon. The day was renamed “*Nevruz*” as the letter “w” was not in the Turkish alphabet.

A year later, the Turkish media launched a campaign to “prove” that the traditional Kurdish colors of green, red, and yellow were actually those of certain crack Ottoman regiments. This concern with color recalled another attempt to change traffic lights in some southeastern cities of Turkey such as Batman by replacing the supposed Kurdish green with blue. An assessment by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency concluded: “In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the government responded . . . by ruthlessly . . . attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to eliminate all manifestation of Kurdish culture and nationalism.”¹¹

The current Turkish Constitution written in 1982 by the then-ruling Turkish military attempted to continue and revitalize the policy of denying the existence of the Kurds in Turkey.¹² Publications began to appear claiming that the Kurds were really Turks and that there was not a separate Kurdish language. Efforts to illustrate otherwise

¹⁰ Derk Kinnane, *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 32-34; and Ismail Besikci, *Kurdistan & Turkish Colonialism: Selected Writings* (London: Kurdistan Solidarity Committee and Kurdistan Information Centre, 1991), p. 34.

¹¹ National Foreign Assessment Center (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency), *The Kurdish Problem in Perspective* (August 1979), p. 25.

¹² However, by 2017 Erdogan had significantly succeeded in amending the Constitution to create a much stronger office of the president for himself and abolished the position of prime minister.

were said to be simply fabrications of Western intelligence services and separatist groups seeking to divide Turkey.¹³ When several ethnic Kurdish MPs from the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) voted in favor of the Minority Languages report of the Council of Europe in 1988, they were accused of having joined certain hostile European states in a conspiracy to create a Kurdish minority in Turkey where one did not exist. This situation was essentially replayed as recently as 2005 when Professors Baskin Oran and Ibrahim Ozden Kaboglu were prosecuted for simply arguing in a report regarding EU harmonization laws and commissioned by the prime minister's own office, that "Turk" is an identity of only one ethnic group and that Turkey also includes other ethnic groups such as "Kurds."¹⁴

To be fair to Ataturk and his associates, their ultimate purpose, of course, was to achieve unity and modernization by mobilizing the population in Anatolia behind a territorial and civic-determined national identity.¹⁵ However, many Kurds perceived this attempt to be at the expense of their own religious, traditional, and ethnic identity. Indeed, a case can be made that Kemalist Turkey's policy of attempted assimilation towards the Kurds actually made them more aware of their latent ethnic identity. M. Hakan Yavuz elaborated on the modern origins of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey when he declared: "The state's [Turkey's] policies are the determinant factors in the evolution and modulation of . . . Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The major reason for the politicization of Kurdish cultural identity is the shift from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realities of the Ottoman

¹³ See, for example, I. Giritli, *Kurt Turklerinin Gergegi* (Istanbul: Yeni Forum Yayıncılık, 1989).

¹⁴ Baskin Oran, "The Minority Report Affair in Turkey," *Regent Journal of International Law* 5 (2007), pp. 2-93. <https://baskinoran.com/makale/Minorityreportaffair-RegentJournal.pdf>. For background, see the monumental compilation by Peter A. Andrews, com. and ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1989), p. 18, in which Andrews states: "The popular view in Turkey is in fact quite realistic: . . . In Turkey there are seventy-two and a half peoples." The half refers to the Gypsies. Andrews also lists as ethnic groups in Turkey the Sunni Kurds, Alevi Kurds, Yezidi Kurds, Sunni Zazas, and the Alevi Zazas.

¹⁵ For background, see Jacob M. Landau, ed., *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984); and Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). On the primitive state of the Kurdish national identity and language during the 1920s and 1930s, see Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).



Empire to the nation-state model.”¹⁶ The Kemalist reforms, which aimed to create a modern Turkish nation-state “resulted in the construction of Kurdish ethno-nationalism.”¹⁷ Hamit Bozarslan basically agreed with Yavuz’s analysis when he argued that “the proclamation of the Kemalist Republic in 1923 meant the end of . . . the Ottoman tacit contact between centre and peripheries [and] . . . to a large extent explains the . . . traditional [Kurdish] dignitaries . . . participation in the subsequent revolts.”¹⁸

It is true, of course, that since the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, many ethnic Kurds who were willing to identify as being Turkish were readily admitted into the ruling elite. Abdulmelik Firat (1934-2009), the grandson of Sheikh Said, was a good example. Many other ethnic Kurds served as MPs, cabinet ministers, city mayors, state prosecutors, and directors of state enterprises, etc. They did so, however, only by denying their Kurdish ethnic heritage. Those who refused to do so were penalized as was the case of the 55 Kurdish tribal chiefs exiled to western Turkey after the military coup in 1960¹⁹ and Serafettin Elci, who served as Minister of Public Works in the government of Bülent Ecevit in the late 1970s. Elci was sentenced to two years and three months in prison for “making Kurdish and secessionist propaganda.” He had declared: “I am a Kurd. There are Kurds in Turkey.”²⁰

The PKK Insurgency

Beginning in the 1970s, an increasingly significant portion of Turkey’s population of ethnic Kurds has actively demanded cultural, linguistic, and political rights as Kurds. Until recently, however, the government ruthlessly suppressed these demands for fear they would lead to the breakup of the state itself. This official refusal to brook

¹⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, “Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey,” *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 7 (Autumn 2001), p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Hamit Bozarslan, “Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey: From Tacit Contract to Rebellion (1919-1925),” in Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003), p. 165.

¹⁹ “55 Landowners ‘Exiled’ from Towns,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 5, 1960, p. 14.

²⁰ Marvine Howe, “Turks Imprison Former Minister Who Spoke Up on Kurds’ Behalf,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1981.

any moderate Kurdish opposition helped encourage extremism and the creation of the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK) or Kurdistan Workers Party, headed by Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan on 27 November 1978. In August 1984, the PKK officially launched its insurgency that by 2024 had resulted in more than 40,000 deaths, as many as 3,000 villages partially or completely destroyed, and during the 1990s some 3 million people internally displaced.²¹ Thus, the PKK insurgency represented the nightmare of Turkey's continuing security policy toward the Kurds and the necessity to institute a policy of change.

For a short period in the early 1990s, Ocalan actually seemed close to achieving a certain degree of military success. In the end, however, he over-extended himself, while the Turkish military spared no excesses in containing him. Slowly but steadily, the Turkish military marginalized the PKK's military threat. Ocalan's ill-advised decision in August 1995 to also attack Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in northern Iraq because of its support for Turkey further sapped his strength. The final blow came when Turkey threatened to go to war against Syria in October 1998 unless Damascus expelled Ocalan from his longtime sanctuary in that country.

Ocalan fled to Italy where U.S. pressure on behalf of its NATO ally Turkey pressured Italy and others to reject Ocalan as a terrorist undeserving of political asylum or negotiation. Indeed, for years, the United States had given Turkey intelligence training and weapons to battle against what it saw as the "bad" Kurds of Turkey while ironically supporting the "good" Kurds of Iraq against Saddam Hussein. With U.S. and possibly Israeli aid, Ocalan was finally captured in Kenya on 16 February 1999, flown back to Turkey for a sensational trial, and sentenced to death for treason.

²¹ For more background on the PKK, see Mehmet Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War: Sociopolitical Impacts of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Zeki Sarigil, *Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Cuma Cicek, *The Kurds of Turkey: National, Religious and Economic Identities* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017); and Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).



However, instead of making a hardline appeal for renewed fighting during his trial, Ocalan issued a remarkable statement that called for the implementation of true democracy to solve the Kurdish problem within the existing borders of a unitary Turkey. He also ordered his guerrillas to evacuate Turkey to demonstrate his sincerity. Thus, far from ending Turkey's Kurdish problem, Ocalan's capture simply began a new process of struggle and implicit bargaining between the state and many of its citizens of Kurdish ethnic heritage as represented by the officially illegal PKK and various legal pro-Kurdish parties such as the *Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) or Peace and Democracy Party which was created after the *Demokratik Toplum Partisi* (DTP) or Democratic Society Party was banned on 11 December 2009, but subsequently merged into the more inclusive *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP) or Peoples Democratic Party in April 2014. Since the 1990s, these legal pro-Kurdish parties have elected numerous mayors in the Kurdish areas during the local elections. Indeed, in the national elections held on 7 June 2015, the pro-Kurdish HDP crossed the then-high threshold requirement of 10 per cent and became the first pro-Kurdish party elected to the Turkish national parliament. It successfully has maintained its position in three subsequent national elections held on 1 November 2015, 24 June 2018, and 14 May 2023.²²

In the past two decades, Turkey's potential candidacy for membership in the European Union also has entered the picture.²³ If implemented, EU membership would fulfill Ataturk's ultimate hope for a strong, united, and democratic Turkey joined to the West. However, until Turkey successfully implemented the Copenhagen Criteria of minority rights for its Kurdish ethnic population and suspended Ocalan's death sentence to conform with EU standards which banned capital punishment, it was clear that Turkey's long-treasured candidacy would be only a pipe dream. As some have

²² For more on the legal, pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey, see Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2010). The threshold limit has now been lowered to 7 percent.

²³ For background, see Michael M. Gunter, "Turkey's Floundering EU Candidacy and Its Kurdish Problem," *Middle East Policy* 14 (Spring 2007), pp. 117-23.

noted, Turkey's road to the EU lies through Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan.

However, arguing that Turkey had not implemented the necessary reforms, the PKK ended the cease-fire it had implemented after Ocalan's capture and renewed low-level fighting in June 2004. In addition, opposition to Turkish membership in the EU began to grow in such EU members as France, Germany, and Austria, among others. In November 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's²⁴ *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP) or Justice and Development Party, with its roots in Islamic politics, won an overwhelming victory, which it added to in elections held in July 2007 and again in June 2011. In August 2014, Erdogan was elected president, the first time that office was chosen by a popular vote instead of by the parliament. He was reelected president in June 2018 and May 2023. Although the AKP stumbled briefly in the national parliamentary election held on 7 June 2015 when it lost its parliamentary majority, it subsequently regained and then held its majority when it won two more national parliamentary elections on 1 November 2015 and 24 June 2018. These electoral successes occurred despite the Gezi Park demonstrations of June 2013 against perceived authoritarian AKP rule and a botched coup attempt blamed on the Gulenists in July 2016.

Beginning in 2005, the *Koma Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union began to operate as the umbrella organization bringing together the PKK and numerous other related Kurdish groups in Turkey as well as other states in the Middle East and western Europe.²⁵ Under the leadership of first Murat Karayilan and since July 2013 Cemil Bayik and Bese Hozat, who embody the maxim of joint male/female leadership, some 5,000 PKK guerrillas

²⁴ For background on Erdogan, arguably the most important modern Turkish leader since Ataturk, see Michael M. Gunter, *Erdogan's Path to Authoritarianism: The Continuing Journey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024); Gonul Gol, *Erdogan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2022); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Erdogan: The Making of an Autocrat* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); and Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

²⁵ For background, see Seevan Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).



remained entrenched in the Kandil Mountains straddling the border between northern Iraq and Iran.

Turgut Ozal's Initiatives

When he first came to power, Turgut Ozal continued Turkey's traditional policy of denial, assimilation, and the fist towards the Kurds. For example, in April 1985 he instituted the village guard system of civilian, pro-government Kurdish militia to supplement the state's military and divide the Kurds. Then in the summer of 1987, he also established a system of emergency rule (OHAL) with a regional governor for most of the Kurdish areas in the southeast. The PKK and other critics of official state policy have long considered both measures prime examples of official state repression.

Perhaps because of his Islamic proclivities and their stress on religious equality and/or his earlier studies and work in the United States, Ozal began to change his stance and advocate imaginative reforms after he became president in 1989. Possibly too as president, he began to see himself as more above the everyday fray of politics and a spokesman for all citizens of Turkey and thus charged to take the longer-term view of the future of the body politic. On the other hand, in his previous task as a more partisan prime minister he might have seen himself as simply heading the ruling party or coalition.

If so, however, in September 1989, while still prime minister, Ozal hinted at a reassessment in his cryptic response to a question about the existence of a Kurdish minority in Turkey: "If in the first years of the Republic, during the single-party period, the State committed mistakes on this matter [of the Kurds], it is necessary to recognize these."²⁶ In April 1990, he gave further hints of a new Kurdish policy at the meeting of the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD). At this time he let it be known that the government was "engaged in a quest for a serious model for solving

²⁶ *Briefing* (Ankara), October 2, 1989, p. 4.

the Kurdish problem in a manner that goes beyond police measures.”²⁷

At about the same time, Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, told two Turkish reporters: “Let us declare a cease-fire and sit at the negotiating table. If Turkey abandons its oppressive policy in the region, then we will refrain from violence. . . . In fact, separating the region from Turkey immediately is out of the question. Our people need Turkey and we cannot separate, at least, not for another 40 years.”²⁸

Ozal was not the only Turkish politician seeking new concepts. In the summer of 1990, the SHP (which was at that time the main opposition party) issued a comprehensive policy report on the Kurdish question that went far beyond anything ever before offered by a mainstream Turkish party. Describing the ban on the use of the mother tongue as “primitive” and a “tool of assimilation,” the document called for “the abolition of all restrictions on the use of the mother tongue, the enshrinement of the right of citizens to speak, write and teach their own language and use it in daily life and in various cultural activities and the establishment by the state of research centres and institutes undertaking research into different cultures and languages.”²⁹

Why did some Turkish authorities begin to reassess their historic position? Certainly, the growing PKK insurgency was one reason. Repetitive “groupthink”³⁰ on handling this situation appeared to be stuck, while thoughtful new measures might offer a way out of the growing quandary. The exploding ethnic Kurdish population relative to the slower growing demographics of the ethnic Turks themselves

²⁷ Muserref Seekin and Ilter Sagirsoy, “Measures to Solve Kurdish Problem Proposed,” *Nokta* (Turkey), June 3, 1990, pp. 17-22; as cited in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service—West Europe*, August 6, 1990, p. 38. Hereafter cited as *FBIS-WEU*.

²⁸ Cited in *Hurriyet* (Turkey), April 1, 1990.

²⁹ “The Southeast Report: What Does It Say?” *Briefing*, July 23, 1990.

³⁰ On this concept, see Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972). Janis defines “groupthink” as a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.” *Ibid.*, p. 9.



represented another possible reason, which, however, has not materialized to the extent some had projected.

Ozal himself believed that as ethnic Kurds moved west they tended to assimilate and that already “60 percent of the Kurds live west of Ankara.”³¹ Servet Mutlu has disputed these large population figures for the Kurds by concluding that as of 1996 there were only slightly more than 7 million Kurds living in Turkey, which constituted only 12.60 percent of the country’s total population, “far lower than the 12.5 million to 15 million claimed by some.”³² Mixed marriages and partial assimilation may account for these demographic discrepancies.

In addition, the results of the Gulf War in 1991 stimulated Ozal’s new thinking. Suddenly a nascent Kurdish entity appeared on Turkey’s southeastern border and demanded attention. On 8 March 1991 Turkey broke its longstanding policy against negotiating with any Kurdish groups when Ambassador Tugay Ozceri, under-secretary of the foreign ministry, met in Ankara with Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Iraqi Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Mohsin Dizai, a representative of Massoud Barzani, the leader of the other main Iraqi Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). A second meeting between Ozceri and Dizai occurred on 22 March 1991. In his typical mercurial style, Talabani concluded “that a new page had been turned in relations between Turkey and the Kurds of Iraq.”³³

Ozal’s bold gesture towards the Iraqi Kurds soon evolved to the point that Turkey actually issued Turkish diplomatic passports to Talabani and Barzani to facilitate their travel abroad. At one point, Talabani even suggested that the Iraqi Kurds might want to be annexed by Turkey.³⁴ By inviting the Iraqi Kurdish leaders to Ankara,

³¹ Ankara TRT Television in Turkish, 1800 GMT, October 14, 1992; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, October 15, 1992, p. 28.

³² Servet Mutlu, “Ethnic Kurds in Turkey: A Demographic Study,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (November 1996), pp. 532, 533.

³³ “Kurdish Leader on Significance of Talks in Ankara,” *Ankara Anatolia in English*, 1515 GMT, March 14, 1991; as cited in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service—Near East & South Asia*, March 15, 1991, p. 39.

³⁴ Graham Fuller, “The Fate of the Kurds,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Spring 1993), p. 114.

Ozal also might have been seeking another way in which to deflate the PKK insurgency in Turkey. Being seen as trying to help their ethnic kin in northern Iraq, might be well received by the Turkish Kurds. It might illustrate to the ethnic Kurds in Turkey that the Turkish state was not necessarily hostile to the Kurds in general, but only to the violence of the PKK.

Ozal's actions created a furor in Turkey. To some he was simply being realistic in seeking to build reasonable relations with those who looked likely to establish an autonomous Kurdish region on Turkey's border. Better to be seen by this fledgling entity as a friend and protector than inveterate enemy. To others, however, Ozal was dangerously opening up a Pandora's box of troubles that would come back to threaten Turkish territorial integrity. If the Turkish president could countenance some sort of federal solution for the Iraqi Kurds, might he not also be contemplating one for the ethnic Kurds in Turkey? Indeed Ozal was soon to shock his countrymen by declaring he was willing to discuss a federal system if only to oppose it.³⁵ In another break from the past, Ozal revealed that his grandmother had been of Kurdish origin.³⁶ He went on to explain that Turkey was being prevented from progressing by a series of taboos and that he intended to challenge them.³⁷

In time, these "safe havens" morphed into the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—Iraq of today. United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 of 5 April 1991 gave a certain amount of legal sanction for this action when it condemned "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population . . . in Kurdish populated areas, the consequences of which threaten international peace and security in the region" and demanded "that Iraq . . . immediately end this repression." It was the first time in its almost half century of existence that the world organization had so explicitly addressed the Kurdish question. Turkish willingness to allow the United States to

³⁵ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 430.

³⁶ Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, "Turkey's Kurdish Question: Critical Turning Points and Missed Opportunities," *Middle East Journal* 51 (Winter 1997), p. 72.

³⁷ *Hurriyet*, April 28, 1992.



enforce Operation Provide Comfort and the no-fly zone over northern Iraq from bases in southeastern Turkey provided the military protection necessary for the fledgling KRG to begin to develop.

However, Turkey was caught between a rock and a hard place since by allowing Operation Provide Comfort to continue, it was in effect encouraging nascent Iraqi Kurdish statehood. To abandon the force, however, would simply lead it to regroup elsewhere and strip Ankara of any influence whatsoever over the course of events much as would later occur after Turkey's decision not to join the United States in its invasion of Iraq in 2003. At best, some argued, "Turkey appears to have been selling support for the multilateral force against silence on its own Kurdish question."³⁸ Therefore, Turkey repeatedly allowed the Operation to be renewed at six-month intervals. Ankara, however, added the provision that the territorial integrity of Iraq must be respected. This meant, of course, that Turkey continued to oppose the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. The entire situation illustrated the complicated interplay between Turkey's policies of change and continuity toward the Kurds.

Following Ozal's sudden death on 17 April 1993, however, Suleyman Demirel, as the new president, decided to reverse Ozal's initiatives towards the Iraqi Kurds and permitted relations with them to deteriorate. As a result, one might argue that Turkey lost its ability to influence the development of events in northern Iraq, which it otherwise might have had if Ozal's policies had been maintained.

Domestically, Ozal also partially repealed Law 2932, under which the military government had banned the usage of the Kurdish language in 1983. Ozal now allowed the language to be used in everyday conversation and folkloric music recordings. However, using Kurdish in official agencies, publishing, or teaching would still be a crime. Events moved quickly under Ozal, and within the following year, he was suggesting that the GAP Television Network should

³⁸ *Briefing*, June 29, 1992, p. 15.

carry 60- or 90-minute programs in Kurdish and that the appropriate schools even teach in that language: "What would happen if we do it? We should not be afraid of this at all."³⁹ Years later, after Ozal had been long dead, the well-known Turkish journalist Cengiz Candar revealed how Ozal had once warned him not to write about the need for Kurdish language TV and education. Six months later, however, Ozal himself came out with just such proposals. When the two next met, Ozal told Candar "who says it and when it is said matters. If you had suggested this six months ago, the military would have been all over you. But when I, the president, suggest it six months later, it might have better traction."⁴⁰

Response

The response of many influential Turkish politicians demonstrates how Ozal's modest proposals to begin to change his country's historic position on the Kurdish question were very controversial because they seemingly threatened Turkish security. Suleyman Demirel, who as noted above succeeded Ozal as president following his death in 1993, declared for example: "this move is an attempt at dividing the country. . . . This is the greatest harm you can inflict on Turkey."⁴¹ Others expressed themselves even more forcefully. Oltan Sungurlu, the minister of justice, exclaimed: "What language is that? I do not know of such a language."⁴² Alpaslan Pehlivanli, the chairman of the justice committee in the Turkish parliament, asserted: 'If the word 'language' now in the bill stays in, we will have admitted that the Kurds are a nation. . . . If it passes this way, tomorrow there will be cafes where Kurdish folk songs are sung,

³⁹ Cited in "Ozal Interviewed on Kurdish Issue, Violence," *Milliyet*, August 23, 1992, p. 11; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, September 3, 1992, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Cengiz Candar, "Kurt Kimligini Kabul: Dil'e Saygi," *Radikal*, October 14, 2008.

⁴¹ "Demirel Warns on Effects of Kurdish Issue," *Cumhuriyet* (Istanbul), March 26, 1991; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, April 2, 1991, pp. 36-37.

⁴² "Unbanning of Kurdish Discussed, Examined," *Nokta*, February 10, 1991, pp. 26-27; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, March 6, 1991, p. 29.



theaters where Kurdish films are shown, and coffee houses where Kurdish is spoken. If this is not separatism, what is?”⁴³

Other Turkish leaders, however, seemed to cautiously approve Ozal’s initiative.⁴⁴ Erdal Inonu, the leader of the SHP, said that it was a positive step and that he was pleased that the government finally had accepted a policy that was originally his. Husamettin Cindoruk, the speaker of the Turkish parliament, declared that Ozal’s initiative was an “end of a constitutional embarrassment.” Even former president Kenan Evren, who had led the military takeover in 1980 and had been the architect of the laws reinforcing the prohibition of the use of Kurdish and especially Law 2932, expressed his guarded support “as long as this does not enter the schools or appear on placards during demonstrations.” Many years later, Evren even implicitly supported Ozal’s language reform when the general mused that his original ban “was not a proper step to be taken on the path toward modernization and democratization.”⁴⁵

Abortive Cease-fire

In the second half of February 1993, Jalal Talabani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader and frequent foe of the PKK, nevertheless met with Abdullah Ocalan in Syria to discuss Ozal’s initiatives and how to react to them. Following this meeting, Talabani presented Ozal on 8 March 1993, Ocalan’s proposal for a cease-fire: “I am giving up the armed struggle. I will wage a political struggle in the future. . . . Turkish officials can hold talks with Kurdish deputies in the National Assembly. We agree to live within Turkey’s existing borders if the necessary democratic conditions are created to allow us to do so.”⁴⁶ Then on 17 March 1993, Ocalan followed up this message with a

⁴³ Ilter Sagirsoy, “No, Despite Ozal,” *Nokta*, February 24, 1991, pp. 28-29; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, March 26, 1991, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁴ The following citations were taken from Institut Kurde de Paris, *Information and Liaison Bulletin*, no. 70, January 1991, pp. 2-4. See also “Language Freedom to Herald Democracy Drive?” *Briefing*, February 11, 1991, pp. 6-9.

⁴⁵ Cited in “Evren Regrets Ban on Public Use of Kurdish Language,” *Today’s Zaman*, November 11, 2007.

⁴⁶ Cited in “Ocalan Spokesman Denies Report,” *Hurriyet*, March 14, 1993, p. 22; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, March 15, 1993, p. 43.

formal declaration of “unilateral and unconditional”⁴⁷ cease-fire at a press conference in the Bekaa valley town of Zahlah, some six miles from the Syrian border. Symbolically, the PKK leader doffed his guerrilla fatigues and put on a suit and tie for the occasion.

During his press conference, Ocalan made some of the following conciliatory points. The Kurds in Turkey “want peace, dialogue, and free political action within the framework of a democratic state.” He explained that “we are not working to partition Turkey. We are demanding the Kurds’ human rights (cultural, political, and so on) in the framework of one homeland.” After praising Talabani’s role “in bringing this initiative to fruition,” the PKK leader then stressed that “we want guarantees, because we cannot be betrayed, as happened with our historic leaders like Shaykh Said and the Badrakhaniyyin.”⁴⁸

A truly historic opportunity, the cease-fire failed for two basic reasons: 1) the continuing security attitude of the Turkish authorities, who interpreted Ocalan’s move as a sign of weakness and therefore their chance to finish his movement off, rather than as a way to achieve a permanent solution to the Kurdish question; and 2) the sudden death of Ozal, the Turkish leader who was probably most receptive to some type of compromise that might have ended the struggle. While the cease-fire hung in the balance, his sudden death on 17 April 1993 dealt the peace process a fatal blow by removing the Turkish official most receptive to bold, imaginative thinking on the issue.

⁴⁷ This and the following discussion and citations were taken from Kamran Qurrah Daghi, “Ocalan Explains Peace Overtures,” *Al-Hayab*, March 17, 1993, p. 1, 4; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, March 22, 1993, p. 42.

⁴⁸ After crushing his rebellion, the Turkish authorities hanged Sheikh Said on 29 June 1925. See Olson, *The Sheikh Said Rebellion*, p. 127. Bedr Khan Beg ruled the powerful Kurdish emirate of Botan—which at its height included much of present-day southeastern Turkey and even parts of northern Iraq—from approximately 1821-1847, when the Ottomans forced him to surrender and sent him into exile where he died. See Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, pp. 177-82.



Citing “very senior sources within the security apparatus,”⁴⁹ for example, İsmet G. İmset claimed that if Özal had lived, “everything would have been different. A major reform package would have been underway and even the hawks [hard-liners] would have fallen in line.” Apparently, an important meeting of the National Security Council (MGK)—until Erdoğan’s reforms after he became prime minister in 2003, the military body that decided security matters in Turkey—had been scheduled for a week after Özal’s death. The president had ordered a special group within the MGK to be set up “to seek political solutions to the crisis, to brainstorm and produce ideas, and to carry them out.” In the words of one official, “it would have been [just] short of a revolution.” After Özal unexpectedly died, however, the meeting was postponed. For several weeks Turkish policy drifted until Süleyman Demirel finally emerged as the new president and Tansu Çiller as the new prime minister. When the MGK meeting Özal had originally planned was finally held, Demirel, who was unwilling to take bold steps, was now in charge. “What happened is that Özal was a momentum, a political one, that was thrusting us out of a vicious cycle. Now, we have fallen back into orbit again. We are part of the vicious cycle,” declared a senior officer. More than a decade would go by of sterile minimalist reform policies before Erdoğan took up the mantle of true reform again in 2005.

The Continuity of Security and Its Consequences

The present (1982) constitution instituted by the military after its successful coup in 1980 contained a number of specific provisions that sought to limit even speaking or writing in Kurdish. Its preamble, for example, declared: “The determination that no protection shall be afforded to thoughts or opinions contrary to

⁴⁹ This and the following citations were taken from İsmet G. İmset, “Wiping Out the PKK Again and Again . . .,” *Turkish Probe* (Turkey), July 6, 1993, pp. 4-7; as cited in *FBIS-WEU*, July 29, 1993, p. 52. İmset was an objective observer of the entire Kurdish question who had published a great deal about the PKK during the 1980s and early 1990s until threats against his life led to his exile. For an example of his work, see İsmet G. İmset, *The PKK: A Report on Separatist Violence in Turkey (1973-1992)* (Istanbul: Turkish Daily News Publications, 1992). For further detailed background, see more recently the well-connected Cengiz Candar, *Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 97-116.

Turkish national interests, the principle of the existence of Turkey as an indivisible entity.” Two articles banned the spoken and written usage of the Kurdish language without specifically naming it.

Although restrictions on the usage of the Kurdish language were eased following the Gulf War in 1991, Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law that entered into force in April 1991, made it possible to consider academics, intellectuals, and journalists speaking up peacefully for Kurdish rights to be engaging in terrorist acts. Similarly, under Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code, mere verbal or written support for Kurdish rights could lead one to be charged with “provoking hatred or animosity between groups of different race, religion, region, or social class.” Despite harmonization efforts of the European Union (EU), a new Article 301 that took effect in June 2005 made it a crime to denigrate “Turkishness,” a provision that made it possible for extreme nationalists and statist to accuse writers, scholars, and intellectuals such as Nobel-Prize-winning Orhan Pamuk of treason and subversion. Thus, although many partial reforms have occurred in recent years, as of this writing in 2024, the promised new, more democratic and civilian constitution has yet to be written.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For background, see Michael M. Gunter, “Turkey: The Politics of a New Democratic Constitution,” *Middle East Policy* 19 (Spring 2012), pp. 119-25.

