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The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of a Trans-State Ethnic Conflict

Edited by Kemal Kirisci and Gareth Winrow

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The arrest of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya by Turkish security agents in February 1999 and the spectacular demonstrations by Kurdish supporters throughout Western Europe have focused international attention on the role of the Kurds in Turkey. As the authors of this important study indicates, "the Kurdish question in Turkey is a highly complex, controversial and extremely politically sensitive issue". And because of its trans-state nature, developments in northern Iraq, in particular, are also causing additional complications for Turkish decision-makers". Kemal Kirisci has already written a useful study of the international relations of the PLO and so is familiar with a movement working in difficult conditions to create an independent state. Both Kirisci and Winrow teach political science at Bogazici University in Istanbul and so are close observers of the Turkish political scene. They are sensitive to the fact that expressions of concern for the position of the Kurds in Turkey "could incite Turkish nationalist extremists to resort to violence in order to pre-empt what they might fear to be the first steps toward the break-up of the state".

This study was written with a grant from the US Institute of Peace and is part of the Institute's on-going interest in nationalism and ethnicity. Thus, the study begins by reviewing the concepts of nation, ethnic group, ethnic nationalism, minority rights and self-determination. The authors trace the parallel growth of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism during the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman period, religion was the main factor of identification and division. Kurds and Turks were grouped together in "the house of Islam', while others, Christians and Jews, existed in a largely self-governing millet system. The Kurdish question is an element in the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into modern Turkey – shift from a traditional society-where identities were religiously determined at a communal level, to a modern society where the aim was to define an individual's identity at the state level. At the state level, there are only Turkish citizens or citizens of Turkey. The dilemma is whether all citizens are also ethnic Turks or whether a citizen of Turkey can also have another ethnic identity while still having all the rights of a citizen.

During the first period of the Turkish State (1924 to 1945) everyone (residing within Turkey) was regarded as a Turk even if he himself was not conscious of it. The theory was that as the Turks had come from Central Asia, they had absorbed all prior inhabitants, even those, like the Kurds who lives in isolated mountain areas and spoke a non-Turkic language. The state propaganda through

history teaching and linguistic studies was to insist that everyone was a Turk; even those who had forgotten the fact. The Kurds were “mountain Turks”.

As it often happens, when history and linguistic identities are sued for political ends, counter history and linguistics come to the fore. Thus the intellectual Kurds started studying their history, and little by little, an intellectual structure of Kurdishness developed, basically after the Second World War. Although most Kurds thought of themselves in narrow Tribal terms, among intellectuals and politically-aware individuals, a pan-Kurdish identity started to grow and saw the kinship with the Kurds living in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and some of the republics of then USSR. In the 1920s and 1930s, there had been short-lived but violent Kurdish revolts against the centralizing tendencies of the Turkish government. But these revolts were usually led by tribal chiefs or charismatic religious leaders.

It was not until 1984 that the PKK, made up largely of youth, influenced by Marxism, independent of traditional Kurdish tribal leaders, started a program of violence against Kurds, who were considered allies of the Turkish government. The PKK was strong in the poor mountainous areas where the state authorities had difficulty to penetrate. The PKK had military bases in northern Iraq and training camps in Syria.

The Turkish government’s first reaction was to consider this violence as terrorism and to treat it as a military problem to be solved with military means. This is still the attitude of many political figures and most of the military. But after 15 years of violence, with many dead and villages destroyed, the PKK is still there. The PKK does not necessarily represent the majority of the Kurdish people, but the arrest of Ocalan has touched a wide cord of sympathy even among those Kurds who reprove the violence and sectarian spirit of the PKK.

Kirisci and Winrow outline some of the elements, which could lead to compromise and an end to violence. Above all, there is a need to establish some basis of trust for compromise to be possible. There is a need for a general democratization of authority and political initiative, as well as economic programs to reach all areas of the country.

With a certain amount of good will, the violence in Turkey could diminish, but the road to calm may still be long. As the authors state: “Within Turkey itself, hopes for further democratization and devolution of decision-making powers, the development of a dialogue, and the possible emergence of multiculturalism based on a real and genuine civic nationalism still remain at present only hopes. Not all Turkish officials and political parties are willing to accommodate moves toward further democratization and pluralism in Turkish society. At the same time, there is a tendency among many Kurdish radicals to pursue a policy based on what amounts to exclusive ethnic nationalism.”

There are no easy solutions, but time will not heal by itself. There must be leadership both among Turks and Kurds to break out of the sterility of violence and build a base for a democratic and liberal society.