Nation-states and ethnic boundaries: modern Turkish identity and Turkish–Kurdish conflict*

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ABSTRACT. Ethnic and religious conflicts are two of the most pressing issues facing Turkey today. This article offers the argument that the development of the Turkish state and identity, and Turkey’s peripheral position in the interstate system, have collectively determined the parameters and dynamics of the conflicts. It is argued that modern Turkish identity has been forged by the state through the nation-state formation process that began in the 1920s. During the transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic it was deemed necessary to redefine the state and Turkish identity. At the historical juncture, Islam was replaced with other ideals and universals such as Turkism, modernity and étatism. The sudden and large-scale shift away from religion followed by vigorous ethnic assimilation efforts created a contradictory context between the state and ethnic/religious segments of the population. The change also marked the beginning of a new era in the Turkish–Kurdish discord. Another assertion of the article is that the state’s approach to ethnic/religious issues and demands is consistent with the assumptions and predictions of the ethnic democracy model.

Ethnicity and nationalism

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed the spread of nationalism and formation of independent states. These developments pose a challenge to the primordial views on ethnicity and nationalism (Shils 1957; Isaacs 1975; Geertz 1973 and 1983). Such perspectives do not provide an adequate explanation for the sudden surge of nationalism, the variations among different groups with respect to the timing and intensity of nationalist movements, and the conflict that arises from the relationship between ethnicity and the state. In addition, the current differences in democracies with respect to the management of ethnic conflict pose another challenge,

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since the Western models of democracy (individual-liberal, republican-liberal and consociational democracy) do not offer an appropriate framework for the analysis of democracies in emerging societies.

As suggested by Sammy Smooha in this issue of Nations and Nationalism (2002), multicultural and ethnic democracies are the two other emerging forms of democratic political systems. In addition, there is a set of differences among the societies in terms of individual equality, citizenship, group rights, the role of the state, assimilation policies, and mechanisms of integration and conflict management.

The purpose of this article, thus, is to examine two crucial issues as they relate to Turkey: the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism on the one hand, and the existing forms of ethnic conflict management in democratic systems on the other.

Despite their analogous use, ethnic groups and nations are formed by two very distinct processes. Ethnicity originates from real or assumed kinship and common social relations. Ethnic identities, in this sense, are primordial. Nationalism, on the other hand, refers to the boundaries of the state and nationhood simultaneously and it is a modern phenomenon. While the boundaries of ethnic identities are elastic and may extend beyond the national borders (Nielsen 1985), nationalism represents civil ties and assumes the existence of a political entity/state. The relationship between them is such that statehood has been placing increasing demands on ethnic identities for the formation of nationhood, and, thus, has created a contradiction between ethnicity and the state.

The dialectic between ethnicity and the state derives from the proclivity in contemporary societies to substitute primordial ties with civil ties. This means that existing cultures, languages and tribal/ethnic identities are thrust towards national affiliations and state-dictated cultural objectives. Thus, there is a disparity between the geographic and ideological boundaries of states and the ethnic groups that are located within them. This incongruity exists since the formation of modern states has not followed the logic of social/cultural patterns but rather the logic of markets and political organisation. In addition, ethnic identities themselves are in a constant state of flux.

The tension that exists between the state and ethnicity leads to ethnic conflict and, depending on the particular conditions, it is expressed in different forms ranging from small-scale local conflicts to large-scale autonomy or independence claims.

In general, the terms of the historical relations between the groups, their relative status and access to the state, and the location of the state within the core–periphery structure determine the parameters of current ethnic relations.

The terms of the historical connection between ethnic groups play an important role in determining current relations. The reason for this is that every social unit keeps a record of its past, including conflicts, and passes it on to the next generations along with other cultural characteristics. This is done
not only for achieving cultural continuity, but also for the definition and cohesion of the group. For the same purpose, the real or fictitious past is used as a source from which identities are drawn (Anderson 1991). Groups that are amalgamated by common bonds (culture, religion, economy, etc.) or force (direct or indirect) will dissolve when the unifying elements are removed. Similarly, new groups and allegiances may be formed, due to the emergence of common themes.

The status of different groups and their relationship to the state are critical elements in ethnic relations. Variables such as the relative size of ethnic groups, the existence of a territorial claim and the degree of access to the state and power structure determine the content and context of ethnic relations (McAdam et al. 1988; Kriesi et al. 1995). In this regard, ethnic protest will exist when there is economic inequality along ethnic lines. If there is a territorial claim, the intensity of the ethnic conflict will be high compared to the absence of such a claim; and ethnic exclusion in the decision-making process at the state level will lead to protest and conflict.

Ethnic conflicts are also determined by the location of the state in the core–periphery structure since ethnic and economic inequality vary between the core and peripheral states (Gurr 1993; Olzak 1998). Peripheral states tend to have less democratic and more oppressive regimes, periods of political uncertainty and fewer resources. These characteristics greatly reduce their ability to wield ethnic relations. Evidence suggests that during the initial stages of state-building, ethnic movements become violent when claims to power and physical boundaries are still contested (Rokkan 1970; Smith 1979 and 1981). Hence, ethnic protests tend to be more frequent but non-violent in the core, and less frequent yet more violent in the periphery (Olzak 1998).

Thus, as a result of their status in the interstate system and the pressures from both ‘above’ (regionalisation and globalisation) and ‘below’ (claims on ethnic identity and rights), modern states have opted for different political systems with varying degrees of democracy (Smooha 2002). The structural pattern in the democratic systems is such that it consists of five general types: individual-liberal, republican-liberal, consociational, multicultural and ethnic democracies. This fivefold typology covers the range of existing democratic systems, and presents an alternative model for comparative studies of ethnicity and politics.

The Turkish–Kurdish conflict will be analysed using the framework outlined above. The main focus will be on the reason(s) and timing for the nationalist trends in the region, their respective outcomes, and the means of negotiation of ethnic boundaries and individual/group rights within the present Turkish political system. More specifically, the issues to be addressed are the formation of Turkish identity and its effects, the Kurdish nationalist movement and its dimensions, and the current conditions surrounding the conflict.
The transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish nation-state

The formation of modern states has evolved around the patterns appropriate for their status in the world system. The core states went through the state-formation process earlier, possibly beginning around the eighteenth and ending in the nineteenth century. The peripheral states, on the other hand, had a different experience depending on whether they were colonised or not. While relatively strong states, which were able to stay independent, had been through the state-formation process in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, most of the colonised entities did not have the option until the second half of the twentieth century.

In general, Western states tend to have individual, republican, consociational or multicultural democracy. In contrast, most of the remaining countries have either ethnic democracy or no democracy at all. What distinguishes ethnic democracy from other democracies is that it is based on the ‘contradictory combination of democracy for all with ethnic ascendancy’, and the absence of civic equality and civic nation (Smooha 2002: 3).

Not surprisingly, Turkey has adopted ethnic democracy as its political system since its inception in 1923. There are a number of factors in the development of its political system, and the resulting dilemmas that Turkey is currently facing. Thus, in this section these factors will be analysed by linking the past and the present with a focus on the political and social legacy of its predecessor.

The Ottoman Empire was a significant force in the world historical arena for more than 600 years. Its success was made possible, among other factors, by the ability to integrate conquered lands and populations into the Empire. This was crucial since its immense size could not be maintained in any other way. There were many different groups characterised by differences in religion, language, culture and institutions. Even the Porte (Ottoman government/court) was isolated from the rest of the Turkish population by its own language and customs.

Successful war and assimilation strategies led to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire which eventually contained a large number of millets (groups defined by religion and language) and kavims (ethnic groups/tribes). The system worked well during the era of its ascendancy. However, the expansion of the world system and its effects resulted in the weakening of the Empire. Internally, the capitalist mode of production was implemented through the incorporation process; externally, the consolidation of European states with professional armies, advanced war technologies and, most importantly, financial and economic strength began to exert greater pressure on the Ottoman state in the eighteenth century. This was the beginning of Ottoman decline (Lewis 1968; Kasaba 1988).

Despite its early connection with the world division of labour, the Ottoman Empire experienced a prolonged incorporation process. This was a result of the relative strength of the state, the population scarcity that
prevailed at the time and the retardation of a development of a national bourgeoisie by the bureaucratic class. It was different from other states in that the Empire was neither a part of the core nor was it one of the colonised entities. The penetration of the capitalist mode of production, therefore, was not smooth but it was ‘resisted’ and ‘accommodated’ (Güälş 1991: iv).

The scarcity of population also contributed to the delay of the incorporation. The long and devastating wars on several fronts had diminished the working-age population. The low land:labour ratio made labour expensive to employ on a large scale. Even the regions that were incorporated earlier, such as Macedonia and western Anatolia, had a small number of çiftlik (large commercial farms) because of labour shortages (Kurmuş 1987; Pamuk 1987).

Small producers who owned plots of land contributed to the production of cash-crops while slowing down the proletarianisation of the population. In the beginning of the twentieth century ‘only about 10 per cent of the peasant households in Macedonia were engaged as sharecroppers on çiftlik estates, the independent small holders making up the overwhelming majority’ (Tuncay and Zurcher 1994: 30). The pattern of land ownership has persisted until today (Keyder 1989). The bureaucratic class prolonged the process by hindering the development of a capitalist and landlord class through restrictions on commercial activities and land ownership, while eliminating the non-Muslim bourgeoisie class from the borders of the empire (Keyder 1987; Güälş 1991).

Feeling the effects of economic and military force exerted by the strong powers of Europe, the Ottoman state tried to modernise in the eighteenth century. However, this was limited to the military and war technology. It was not until the nineteenth century that broad reforms were initiated.

Between 1807 and 1908 there were major reform efforts in the military, the state and social structures. They included the establishment of military and medical schools, a general post office, ministries and the parliament, constitutional laws replacing sultan’s orders, equal rights, taxes based on income, trial system for punishment, agricultural reforms and secularisation of the state (Lewis 1968). The changes, however, were superficial and shortlived, since the state lacked the power to control the traditional branches of the military and the financial resources necessary to implement any reforms. In addition, the elitist and top-to-bottom nature of the reforms made it almost impossible to penetrate the lower echelons of society (Barkey 2000). Thus, the efforts to rejuvenate the empire without changing its main principles failed.

The real threat of losing Anatolia, the centre of the Empire, in 1918 when the Allied and Greek forces invaded it following World War I presented an urgent need for redefinition of both the geographic borders and raison d’être of the state. Success in reclaiming independence in 1922 and forming the new Republic in 1923 brought forward the age-old question: ‘Where do we go from here?’

The modernisation efforts by the late sultans were now formulated into a nation-state formation project (Brockett 1998). It was carried out in two
areas: the definition and role of the state on the one hand, and national identity on the other. The debate on state and nationhood could not be settled on a democratic or national platform since political stability and cohesion could not be guaranteed by taking an egalitarian and pluralistic approach. This meant that the formation of a national identity could not come from bottom-to-top, but had to be assumed by the state (Barkey 2000). Moreover, the meaning of ‘Turk’ itself was vague and needed to be defined.

Islam, being the fundamental principle of the society up until that time, was one of the alternatives at the new juncture. The difficulty, however, was twofold: first, there were many non-Muslim millets who did not want to be under Turkish control; and, secondly, there were objections as to the role of Islam in the state’s objectives. The founders and the elite of the new state perceived Islam as an obstacle to the adoption of Western political, economic and social standards. They also considered Islam a suspect in the possible restoration of the old system (Barkey 2000). Thus, Islam, either alone or attached to the revival of Ottomanism, was not considered as a viable option.

Another alternative was Turkism with two motifs: Pan-Turkism and Turanism (Landau 1995). The first of these was based on the notion that the union of all peoples with ‘proven or alleged’ Turkic origins should be sought. The second movement, Turanism, was broader in its inclusion, since it sought the unification of all peoples whose origins are ‘purported’ to go back to Turan, the legendary region of Turkish origin in the steppes of Central Asia. One of the implications of this notion was that the Hungarians, Finns and Estonians were considered Turks, as opposed to Pan-Turkism that included only the Turkic peoples of Russia, the Ottoman Empire and others in the region, such as those in Iran. The political realities of the time, however, permitted neither the pursuit nor the realisation of these ideals. Instead, the frontiers were limited to the borders of present-day Turkey.

**Turkish state and identity**

According to a study by Tubingen University, there are forty-seven different ethnic groups in Turkey (Andrews 1989). Another study by the 2000’e Doğru magazine increases the number to 100 (Soysu 1992). These numbers reflect the diversity of the Ottoman social structure. In today’s Turkish society most of these groups have been assimilated, despite the fact that some of them have been able to preserve their language/dialect, customs and social organisation.

Until the late 1800s the word Turk did not have any political meaning. It was not used as an attribute that justified the stratification of the society, defining Turks as the dominant group. David Kushner notes of a traveller around the late 1800s who wrote:

The name ‘Turk’ is rarely used and I have heard it employed only in two ways, either as a distinguishing term of race (for example, you ask whether a village is ‘Turk’ or
‘Turkmen’) and as a term of contempt (for example, you mutter ‘Turk Kafa’ (Turk head) where in English you would say ‘blockhead’). (Kushner 1977: 20).

Şemseddin Sami, a prominent writer of the time, states that ‘the name “Turk” is regarded as degrading by the ignoramuses of the common folk and is meant to be applied only to the peasants of Anatolia’ (quoted in Kushner 1977: 21). The term ‘Ottoman’, on the other hand, denoted citizenship of the Empire.

There were two possible reasons for the subsuming of Turkish identity into that of the Ottoman. One argument is that the founders of the Ottoman Empire had inherited the Byzantine political and social traditions. Their influence, as well as the administrative power of the convert high-ranking officials who never forgot their roots and used their power against the Turkish populations at times, had increased over the life of the Empire (Öz 1992 and 1995). Thus, it was not a truly Turkish empire. The other is that the multiethnic structure of the Ottoman domains necessitated a universalistic approach that did not, at least on the surface, put any group at the forefront.

History has proven the latter to be true. The political choice was expressed by Şevket Söreyya Aydemir, a contemporary of Mustafa Kemal: ‘Before [the Balkan Wars] we had also been Turks, but it was thought that the word Turk, reminiscent as it was of the hegemony of one people over others, in an empire which brought together many people, would be wounding’ (quoted in Mardin 1997: 115).

The terms ‘Turk’ and ‘Turkey’ gained their modern meaning for the first time through their use by the Europeans (Kushner 1977). The prevalent social ideologies of the period in Europe considered communities as distinct racial and ethnic groups. Around the nineteenth century the European studies of Turkology had put forward works about the history and languages of pre-Islamic Turks (Landau 1995). The previously obscure past of the Turks was thrown into a new light when the origin of Turks was traced to Central Asia where they had lived as nomads and roamed freely.

The works by the European sources provided the history needed for the state struggling to create a nation. The problem, however, was that Turkish identity could not be based on racial or ethnic traits since the population contained many different groups. In fact, Turks had been mixing with indigenous populations since their migration to the region. Thus, not only was it impossible to separate Turks (racial or ethnic) from non-Turks, it was also risky in that, if followed, the venture would have resulted in a very small number of Turks.

Alternatively, there was the idea that racial characteristics did not matter (Gökalp 1968). As long as the people shared the same culture, language and aspirations they were Turks. However, on this front the diversity of languages posed a dilemma. In addition, the aspirations of some Muslim and non-Muslim groups were different than that of the Turks.

Despite the difficulties in grounding the national identity on some principle(s), one thing was certain: the new Turkish state could not appeal to the
same universalistic principles as its predecessor had done. Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the new Turkish Republic, realising the importance of constructing the nation, accelerated the process of homogenisation. The Law of Resettlement, passed in 1934, made assimilation of different cultures official government policy (Mango 1999).

Kemal’s ideas had their origins in those of Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist influenced by the writings of Durkheim. Gökalp’s work provided the foundation for the new Republic in defining its political and social principles. He defined the term Turkism in his book The Principles of Turkism as to ‘exalt the Turkish nation’ (Gökalp 1968: 12). He rejected the racial basis for constructing a nation on the grounds that there is no relationship between biological characteristics and social traits. Since nationality is the sum total of social characteristics, and is independent of racial traits, the meaning must be sought elsewhere.

Gökalp also excluded ethnicity as the basis of a nation because of the impossibility of cultural purity. He argued that humans are not born with social traits but acquire them through education. Thus, education was the only link in forging a nation. He defined nation as ‘not a racial or ethnic or geographic or political group but one composed of individuals who share a common language, religion, morality and aesthetics, that is to say who have received the same education’ (ibid.: 15). According to Gökalp ‘the immediate objective of Turkism is the dominance of a single culture throughout this great expanse’ (ibid.: 18). In his view ‘the mission of Turkism is to seek out the Turkish culture that has remained only among the people and to graft onto it Western civilization in its entirety and in a viable form’ (ibid.: 33). He stated that Ottomanism failed because the Ottoman and Western civilisations contradicted each other. Gökalp also suggested that division of labour within the nation-state would strengthen the common bond.

Despite their obvious contradictions, Gökalp’s ideas on Turkism were adopted by the state. However, once implemented the ideas created their nemesis by forming ethnic friction between the Turks and other ethnic groups, especially the Kurds.

Modern Kurdish history

Historically, the Kurds were squeezed between two equally strong rivals, the Ottoman and Persian empires. Using the rivalry to their advantage, the Kurds were able to construct a buffer zone and enjoy a large degree of autonomy until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their political organisation until that time consisted of independent principalities and small kingdoms.

After losing ever-growing portions of territories, the Ottomans began to consolidate their borders. The campaign included the elimination of Kurdish autonomy on the eastern front and, as a result, some Kurdish groups revolted. Several uprisings in the nineteenth century by leaders such as Sheik
Ubeydullah, Bedirkhan and Yazdansher were, however, unsuccessful against the large and well-equipped Ottoman forces (Arfa 1966; Entessar 1992; McDowall 1996).

The Ottoman Empire collapsed following World War I, and after a four-year independence movement against the occupying Allied and Greek forces, the Turkish Republic was officially declared in 1923. The new state was to be a nation-state. Thus, those minorities with a religion other than Islam but no territorial claim, specifically the Jews, were allowed to become citizens. However, their membership was restricted to the economic sphere (Bali 1999). The Greeks and Armenians, being the non-Muslim minorities whose numbers were greatly reduced by the conflicts before and during World War I, were either compelled to assimilate or were expelled through pressure or population exchange programmes.

The Turkish state then focused its attention on the Kurds and made efforts to integrate them. The government of Mustafa Kemal rejected the existence of Kurds as a separate ethnic group, and chose to eradicate the issue through forced assimilation. The word ‘Kurd’ was eliminated from use, the Kurdish language was banned and Turkish names replaced Kurdish names for children and towns (Barkey 2000).

The state’s other policies of replacing Islamic social and legal codes with Western codes, outlawing religious organisations except those formed and/or run by the state, and making Turkish the official and only language exacerbated the relations between the state and Kurdish populations. The secularisation of the state alienated the religious segments of the Turkish population as well. The removal of Islam as a unifying element and the state’s efforts to assimilate Kurds created a sharper line of division than ever before. Now, the Kurds were facing not only restrictions on religious practices, but also cultural extinction. As a consequence, they organised revolts, which had both religious and nationalistic threads. However, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, Kurdish social movements would remain small-scale, fragmentary and ad hoc rebellions.

In 1924 the Caliphate was abolished and unity of language in education was declared. In the following year the hat was introduced, replacing the fez, and religious activities by religious sects were banned. The combined effect of these changes was an unsuccessful uprising led by Sheik Said in 1925.

The revolt in 1930 was a result of the developments between 1926 and 1929, during which a secular system of government was adopted, new civil laws were introduced giving women more rights, polygamy was outlawed and a constitutional provision was added eliminating Islam as state religion. Similarly, the bloody uprising in 1938 followed changes in state policies, particularly those of 1934 prohibiting religious attire in public and increasing pressure on Kurdish populations. The government labelled the protests and uprisings as reactionary rather than nationalistic and ‘chose to repress rather than penetrate society in order to seek support and legitimization’ (Barkey 2000: 91).
The conflict between the Kurds and Turkish state lost its momentum and assumed a rather subdued character following World War II. The reconciliatory and inclusive policies of the Democratic Party as a part of its liberal economic agenda, quite different from the repressive policies of the 1920s and 1940s, attracted the Kurdish economic and political elite, thus incorporating them into the system. Also, the Cold War and the Soviet threat convinced the general public, including the Kurds, that any domestic dispute was potentially dangerous. The major developments between 1960 and today include three military coups, two failed attempts, the return of repressive ethnic policies while trying to implement liberal economic and political policies, and an acceleration in urbanisation.

The cumulative effects of these events on Kurdish nationalist movement have been momentous. In the long term, the assimilation policies and urbanisation of Kurdish populations have created a wider and stronger Kurdish consciousness, which has expressed itself in the armed, long and bloody resistance on one side, and, although limited, a political movement within the Turkish political system on the other.

Until the assimilation policies and urbanisation trends were in effect, the forms of identification under the name Kurd had always existed in multiplicity. In fact, ‘the concept of “Kurdishness” has never had an unambiguous denotation. Depending on the context and the speaker, it could refer to groups differently demarcated’ (van Bruinessen 1992: 268). In other words, they have identified themselves as speakers of a language or dialect, members of a religious sect or certain tribe, or any combination of them.

There are religious, linguistic and cultural differences among the Kurds, although linguistic barriers have eroded in the recent past. About 75–80 per cent of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims. The rest is divided between the Shi’ites, Yezidis, Alavis and others. Also, each major group is further divided into sects. The differences are significant as they lead to exclusion and friction. The Yezidis, for example, are known as devil worshippers and are looked upon with contempt by both the Turkish and Kurdish Sunnis. The historical divisions between the Sunni and Shi’ite Kurds, manifested by the cooperation of Sunni Kurds with the Ottoman sultans against the Shi’ite Persians, continues even today, although at a diminishing rate.

Another important aspect of Kurdish life is tribalism. Although it has been losing its importance in the past few decades, tribalism still remains influential in the life and consciousness of many Kurds.

The role of the state in the creation of Turkish and Kurdish identities and in the assimilation of Kurds has been central. There are various ways in which the assimilation process is enforced by the state. The military, which perceives itself as the guardian of the state, acts as a supra-government agency and has the last word in the formulation of Turkish domestic and foreign policies.

The initial encounter between Kurdish and Turkish identities takes place in the first grade at school. The elementary education with Turkish as its medium creates the conditions for awareness in the minds of Kurdish pupils.
to their differences from Turks, and, to some degree, other Kurds. Most of them have a Kurdish dialect as their mother tongue. Teachers, appointed by the central government, strictly enforce the use of Turkish both in and outside the classroom.

The compulsory military service is the second stage of the encounter between the two identities. Those who avoid elementary-school education are at a greater disadvantage. They are, like other ethnic groups who either do not speak Turkish at all or speak with a heavy accent, liable to be humiliated and persecuted.

The third stage of the encounter takes place in the labour markets when Kurds move to urban centres either permanently or as migrant workers. There, the Kurds, away from their homeland, are not permitted to express themselves in Kurdish and nor to practise their customs and traditions. The duality of their status, and the social and political pressure they experience in their new environment, contributes to the creation of a unified Kurdish identity and consciousness.

The most significant forces in the displacement of Kurds in Turkey have been urbanisation and the devastating effects of the armed struggle between the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and government forces. The urbanisation and mass migration of people to cities located in Turkey and Europe have been a part of the landscape since the 1960s, and have been increasing since the 1970s.

Until the 1980s, migration movements were almost exclusively generated by the proletarianisation process. The coup in 1980, and the following military operations in the southeastern part of Turkey against radicals and Kurdish nationalists, compelled many Kurds to seek refuge in Europe, thus giving the movements refugee status. At their destination, they formed organisations, networks and channels of communication. They also provided financial support for the well-organised and armed group, the PKK.

The warfare between the PKK and government forces began in 1984 and lasted about sixteen years. During the insurgency 4,049 civilians, 5,121 security personnel and 17,248 people described as terrorists by the government were killed (Milliyet 1998: 8). In addition to the casualties, a large segment of the population in the region has been forced to move to large cities in the region or Europe. According to one estimate, 3,200 villages have been destroyed, forcing 380,000 people to relocate in the region, and another 3 million to migrate to the western parts of Turkey and Europe (Kramer 1999).

The results of PKK activity have been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has contributed to the growth of Kurdish consciousness and nationalism. At the same time, it resulted in the dislocation of possibly millions of Kurdish people, thus reducing them to being absentee-nationalists, and undermining their future territorial claims.

An equally important development has been the effects of the long warfare on the Turkish population. Its dimensions in human suffering related to military and civilian casualties, the fear of attacks on Turkish civilian targets,
and the financial burden on the economy have swayed the public towards a
tougher stand on the Kurdish issue. Furthermore, the warfare also initiated a
sentiment in Turkish ethno-nationalism at the individual level that wishes to
exclude Kurds from both the physical and ideological borders of Turkey and
Turkish identity.

The capture of Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, the leader of the PKK, has
derailed the armed movement and slowed down the momentum of Kurdish
nationalism, at least for the time being. And without a substitute leader, the
future direction of the movement remains uncertain.

On the political front, Turkey’s desire to join the European Union causes
dilemmas for the military, civilian governments and economic interest groups.
While the civilian governments, industrialists and public opinion argue for
membership, the military perceives it as a choice between national unity and
economic gain. The recent statements by the General Staff suggest that the
generals ‘seem to be turning their faces away from the EU’, since one of the
main conditions for membership is the treatment of ethnic/religious minor-
ities and civil liberties (Kibaroğlu 2001: 28). The political power of the mili-
tary is supported in part by its financial independence from the government
through the ownership of military co-op organisations such as OYAK, which,
with sales of $6.5 billion in 2001, is the third-largest employer in Turkey
(Karabelias 1999: 139).  

In summary, given the number and intensity of conflicting goals and inter-
ests as well as the unavailability of acceptable solutions within the existing
political system, Turkey’s current social and economic crises will remain
unresolved.

Conclusions

The principal forces of modern times have resulted in the convergence of
ethnic identity and nation-state. Given this reality, ethnic consciousness is no
longer an exclusively primordial concept, nor is it a cultural universal where-
by individual members are introduced to traditional ways. Rather, it is a
collection of human experiences evolving as a product of economic and cul-
tural domination that are expressed through large, historical undercurrents.

The origins of Turkish nation-state formation and the resulting ethnic con-
flicts have been traced to the expansion of the world system in the region. The
creation of the interstate system has destroyed traditional social, economic
and political structures. Instead, it has assembled a new set of patterns where
previous definitions in political and cultural organisation no longer hold.

The rise of the nation-state system has led to the tendency to eliminate
multiethnic societies and homogenise populations through various methods.
One such method is to draw from a common history no matter how diverse it
is, and to build upon it. Another is to forge new identities based on real or
fictitious notions of the past.
Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 the presence of the world system in the region has grown at an increasing rate. The expanding cycle of commodity production and circulation, coupled with the social and political changes to accommodate such flows, generated the formula for destruction of traditional methods as well as social relations. The proletarianisation of rural populations, including the Kurds, accelerated and it was followed by mass migrations towards metropolitan centres. The migrations of Kurds were augmented by the warfare between government forces and the militant Kurdish organisation, the PKK. Through a feedback mechanism, Kurdish collective consciousness began to expand and include various forms and levels of identification and separation.

Although the lines of division among the Kurds were responsible in some sense for the delayed formation of a Kurdish collective consciousness and a widely supported nationalist movement, they all became connected after the incorporation of the region into the world system, and the formation of the nation-state. In other words, the lines of separation did not have any meaning or relevance before the formation of the Turkish state and identity since there was no contradictory context within which a universal Kurdish identity should or could be configured.

Notes

1 There is a theoretical confusion regarding the meaning of the term ‘primordial’. On the one hand, it is used for ‘primitive’ and, on the other hand, it denotes ‘existing at or from the very beginning’. In human history, ‘primitive’ is not necessarily ‘the beginning’. What is implied by the second meaning is that ethnicity cannot be explained or influenced by factors other than those that are natural or biological. This use is problematic and runs into difficulties. Thus, a more correct way would be to say ‘earlier societies’. In the text the term primordial is used in this sense, representing the changes in populations, social organisation and forms of identity. For a critique of primordial views of ethnicity, see Bonacich 1980.

2 It is customary to define an ethnic group as a nation if any or all of the following conditions are met: common social bonds, collective consciousness and a territorial claim. However, this use is only a partial description since it ignores the context within which ethnic groups and nation-states exist, and the qualitative differences between modern states and earlier political/central authorities.

3 For a conceptual treatment of ethnic democracy, see Smooha 2002.

4 This is not to imply that the nation-state formation process is complete once it is defined. On the contrary, it is in a constant state of negotiation and change.

5 The distinction between the two terms was based on religion, language and the size of the population. For example, Christian subjects were considered as millets whereas the Kurds were considered to be a kavim.

6 1520–66, the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent, marks the zenith of Ottoman power. The decline, measured by a steady loss of territories, began in 1699.

7 The incorporation process involves the outward expansion of the European capitalist world economy by including new zones previously external to it, and establishing economic, political and social links in the production of commodities (Wallerstein 1974 and 1979). On the incorporation of the Ottoman empire, see Wallerstein et al. 1987 and Kasaba 1988.
It is possible to see the two states as the same and one being the continuation of the other in some ways. However, the new Turkish Republic fits the definition of a modern nation-state, compared to the Ottoman empire, which was a world empire.

These officials were a product of the Devşirme system in which every year about a thousand non-Muslim children from newly conquered regions, mostly Christian and orphan, were converted to Islam and taken into the government service based on their physical and intellectual abilities.

Mustafa Kemal’s reforms, in chronological order, were:

1923: The Republic is declared.
1924: The Caliphate is abolished.
1925: The hat replaces the fez; religious sects are outlawed; Western calendar is introduced.
1926: Secular government system is adopted; new civil code is introduced; polygamy is outlawed; women are given equal rights; schools become coeducational.
1928: Constitutional provision is added, declaring that Islam is no longer the state religion; Roman alphabet replaces Arabic alphabet; Turkish Language and History Institute is established; international numeric system is adopted.
1931: The metric system is introduced.
1934: Religious attire in public is prohibited; the surname law is passed; nicknames and personal titles are abolished.

These are the same ideas expressed by Mustafa Kemal in his manual for the new society, which read ‘individual members of the nation share with the generality of Turkish society the same past, history, concept of morals and laws’ (Tezcan 1994: 10).

At this point, Mustafa Kemal mentioned the establishment of ‘local governments’, and ‘the right of nations to determine their destinies’, adding that Kurds would be able to do so provided that they live ‘under the administration of the Grand National Assembly’ (quoted in Mango 1999: 9).

Those who remained were subjected to additional pressure towards assimilation or departure. For example, the capital levy imposed on non-Muslims resulted in the confiscation of most of their assets between 1942 and 1944.

Even today, two of the most significant challenges facing the state are Kurdish and Islamic movements.

In addition to differences in religious practices, language and social organisation, the Kurdish populations are also divided by the physical boundaries of the five states in which they live. According to Kreyenbroek and Sperl (1992), their distribution is (in millions) Iran: 5.0; Iraq: 3.9; Turkey: 9.6; Syria 0.9; Russian Federation: 0.3 – giving an estimated total of 19.7 million. There are disagreements on the number of Kurds in Turkey. A detailed study by Mutlu (1996) estimates the number to be a little over 7 million. Van Bruinessen’s (1992) estimate for 1975 is 7.5 million, which, at the national growth rate of 2.21 per cent, should have reached 10.45 million in 1990. The geography of the region and the isolated existence of Kurdish populations make it difficult to obtain accurate demographics. More accurate and up-to-date data is unavailable since any estimate would have to include the significant number of Kurds who migrated to other countries in the past ten years.

Some of these sects have beliefs and traditions containing elements of Christianity, pre-Christianity and Islam.

The military co-op organisation OYAK is involved in a broad range of activities such as auto manufacturing, cement and construction industries, banking, insurance and various other services. The proceeds from the enterprises are used to provide low-cost credit, subsidised goods and services, and retirement benefits for the members of the armed forces.

References


*Millet* (Turkish daily newspaper) 1998. 30 June: 8.


