



The Kurdish Question: The process and the grave mistakes by the Governments

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Abstract: For many years successive governments in Turkey have ignored an even denied the existence of Kurds in Turkey. What would have been possible in the past by recognizing cultural rights has now been a problem whereby an operation seems to be needed. Two common and important mistakes of governments: one is to say Kurds are primary citizens of this country as if there are secondary citizens! The second is "end the terror and we will recognize some rights". Basic rights cannot be negotiated. This second mistake has led Öcalan to announce his own road map paralel to the Governments. Negotiating with hostile entities is very difficult and needs public consensus. Turkey, unlike Britain and Spain does not have public consensus. The best way was and is to follow EU's democratisation road map.

We need to admit that "the Kurdish problem" is the outcome of long-running consecutive mistakes on the part of our governments and institutions. For a long time the state claimed there were no Kurds in Turkey and refused to acknowledge the Kurdish identity. The mere utterance of the word was forbidden.

Yet, this led to comical situations. While those in Northern Iraq were called "Kurds", once the border was crossed we assumed the Kurds just vanished. It will be useful to

briefly examine this process of denial and expose the picture it created.

To begin with, the Lausanne Treaty had a clause that could have prevented the Kurdish problem from being a problem. Between articles 37-44, which deal with minority rights, there is a significant paragraph that says "every Turkish citizen."

It will be useful to remember that article in its entirety. Article 39/4, either forgotten

or effaced, says: "No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings." Had this article been implemented, there would not have been any restrictions on ethnic identity through language, and perhaps the problem we are facing today would not be so grave. Let us look at main aspects of the picture.

The Kurdish problem was initially discussed because of the uprisings in Turkey. Some might remember the arguments between the "hawkish" İnönü, who gave weight to a military operation in the matter, and "moderate" Fethi Okyar, who argued the problem did not have a military aspect only. Different approaches existed back then as well.

During the 1930s Kurdish citizens were banned from naming their children as they pleased. Names of villages and counties were gradually changed and Turkified by the 1970s. People could no longer openly talk of being Kurdish. Even Hikmet Çetin, who was Foreign Minister in 1991, did not like the mentioning of his Kurdish heritage. In the process of nation-making, certain initial restrictions could have been understood, but the situation turned to the extreme and became a serious case of

identity denial in time. This ban on the language reached its climax when in the aftermath of the 1980 coup "speaking Kurdish even at home" was banned. The late Turgut Ozal lifted this ban in 1991 after much effort.

In 1965, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs heard from diplomatic circles that "the Southeast was boiling," a delegation of 3 people were secretly dispatched to the region. In the report this delegation prepared upon their return, it was said that an uprising was likely within the next 20 years. The government of course disregarded the report. In reality everybody was well aware of the problem but chose to ignore it. During the 1980s some high-up state officials objected to investing in the Southeast, worrying that they would "wake up the people."

Then the PKK terror started in 1984. As the person who typed up the 1965 report (it could not be done by secretaries since the text included the word Kurd), this did not surprise me. In 1988, Ambassadors abroad were still asked to explain to the authorities of their respective countries that the word Kurd came from "kart kurt" (t.n.: It was the state's official stance that the population in the Southeast were "Mountain Turks" and the word Kurd came from sound "kart kurt" made by walking on snow.) Demirel

recognized the Kurdish identity in 1991 when he became Prime Minister, but for some reason never used that word again after that.

In 1993, when I was an advisor to PM Çiller, I told her “This question cannot be the question of any single party; it belongs to the Parliament. You should form a commission in the Parliament that will include bureaucrats working in the region, selected individuals from the region and those informed about the situation, which will then issue a report on the subject to be discussed at the Parliaments General Assembly”. The Prime Minister took the idea to the Speaker of Parliament Cindoruk, who rejected it on the grounds of it being unconstitutional. It is difficult to understand Cindoruk’s stance...

When I was received by President Demirel for a briefing before an upcoming OSCE summit in Istanbul in July of 1999, I told him that a state-run Kurdish TV channel would be a wrong step, that Turkey’s international obligation was to lift the ban on cultural identities, that the state need not engage in these sorts of activities and it would be more suitable to allow private local channels to broadcast in Kurdish. The President wanted me to recount the issue to the Chief of Staff, which I did. When the Chief of Staff told me the state was in the process of establishing a

TV channel in Northern Iraq, I pointed out that this would be an unnecessarily complicating tactic. It was still not comprehended that the state needed to lift the obstructions before cultural identity.

Yet, during the same time newspapers and magazines started to get published in Turkey in Kurdish. Turgut Ozal has a big part in this. The government, too, wanted this to be publicized abroad in response to criticism regarding the bans. Right when this was about to be reported to OSCE, the late Bülent Ecevit, then Prime Minister, declared there was “no such language as Kurdish.” If there was no language, how could the newspapers be explained! Contradictions continued.

The picture is as described above. This issue, which could have been solved through a serious recognition of basic rights, when -so to speak- could have been treated with aspirin and antibiotics, the “patient” has been laid on the operating table.

During the 1990s when the word “Kurdish” began to be used more freely, almost all PMs and Ministers fell into two grave mistakes. The first one is the “Kurds are the primary components (of the nation)” argument. What does this mean? Are there secondary components in Turkey, and who are they? They failed to see the contradiction

in claiming equal citizenship was the unifying bond between the country's citizens and then separating them into primary and secondary components. Some Kurdish leaders, upon hearing this branding of "primary component" asked to go back to the 1921 Constitution that rested on a certain amount autonomy. They also demanded that Kurds and Turks are mentioned together and that Kurdish becomes an official language of the state. These days prominent Kurdish leaders call this "consitutional guarantees." The "primary component" expression put forth carelessly to show Kurds are not a minority is now interpreted in different ways.

The second common mistake of PMs has been the approach that can be summarized as "we will give rights only after terror is ceased." This approach is perhaps even graver than the first mistake. The question, semantic at first sight but essential to the conflict in reality, needs explaining. The current government has found it difficult to name the latest (Kurdish) "initiative." It was first called the Kurdish initiative, then a "democratic initiative, and then the National Unity project. The approach taken up by this government is the process of "granting rights while terror is abolished." In the words of Deputy PM Bülent Arınç, "we must drink the bitter medicine." Such statements encourage Öcalan.

Cultural identity rights, which are part of fundamental rights cannot be made into a point for negotiations. Cases such as everybody learning their native language, naming their children however they please, villages and towns being granted their original names, offering elective Kurdish lessons in high schools and establishing Kurdish Language chairs in universities do not require an amendment in the Constitution. If one says "I will grant these rights along a process, during which terror needs to stop", then one risks appearing to be negotiating with İmralı (Ocalan). Even if terror continues, fundamental rights should be granted unconditionally. In fact, whatever action is being planned is already on the roadmap given to Turkey within the framework of the Copenhagen criteria after Turkey officially became an EU candidate in 1999, including recognition of ethnic and cultural identities and the application of appropriate measures. Couldn't these be done within the democratization condition put forth by the EU?

On the international plane, negotiating with hostile governments or entities is the most difficult task. This can either be direct or indirect, and inevitably requires compromise. The Republic of Turkey is inexperienced in this field. Today negotiations that are going on in Afghanistan with the Taliban are of this sort.

England has been through this process by negotiating with the IRA via Sein Fein, the political arm of the terrorist organization IRA. The English are quite experienced in the field, thanks in no small part to their colonial past and experience. What Spain did with ETA, on the other hand, comes from a different history. In the aftermath of the fascist Franco regime, Spain, which was thirsty for freedom and compromise, had the perspective of EU membership ahead of it, and the public wanted compromise as well.

A similar process requires concurrence in public. It appears from recent developments that the Turkish public is not ready for this. A number of visits by the Minister of Interior to certain intellectuals was not sufficient. Indeed, these meetings led to suspicions as to what the ultimate objective is, since the impression emerged that the objectives were different than those in the EU roadmap. When in addition to these statements were made from İmralı in conjunction with the Minister's statements, suspicions arose that the government was talking to Ocalan through DTP. Ocalan's agenda, on the other hand, was different than the government's; he was aiming for amnesty and becoming active in politics. In short, two incompatible projects emerged and led to scenes in Habur that angered even the government. In reality this was

inevitable; those who came into Turkey from Northern Iraq were following Ocalan's roadmap. The rhetoric of "putting an end to mothers' tears" and the inadmissibility of the current situation encouraged Ocalan, and he announced having drawn a roadmap by himself.

Yet it is also wrong for the Prime Minister to angrily state that they would "cross everything and go back if those coming down from the mountains continue to be welcomed with ecstasy ." What has been the right thing to do all along was to solve the question in the Parliament within the EU democratization process, without involving the discussion of whether the terror would cease or not. If this would have been done, Ocalan would have been disadvantaged to a certain extent. However, when the present picture is one of "granting the rights in parallel to terror ending", it ended up signaling that Ocalan will get those rights by force, which in turn caused a negative public response. As a result, we have a dangerous divergence instead of national unity. If the Prime Minister is going back anywhere, he should be going back the EU roadmap and do what's necessary without engaging in any negotiations.

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