

# Reconciling Statism with Freedom Turkey's Kurdish Opening

Halil M. Karaveli

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# Reconciling Statism with Freedom

## Turkey's Kurdish Opening

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## Preface

For decades, the Kurdish question has been Turkey's most intractable problem, and one that has mired both the country's domestic development and foreign relations. Domestically, Turkey has suffered greatly from its inability to resolve the issue. The Kurdistan Workers' Party's armed campaign against the government, coupled with the regular use of terrorism, drew the Turkish government into a long war that has gone on, with minor interruptions, for over two decades – and in which counter-insurgency tactics contributed to further alienating large sections of the country's Kurdish population. Close to 40,000 people have perished; and increasingly, it has become clear that there is no military solution to the problem. Likewise, as repeated elections in Turkey's southeast have shown, Kurdish nationalism is a reality that will not go away through economic development – long the assumption of Turkey's elites.

Counter-terrorism long provided both a reason and an excuse for the sluggishness of Turkey's democratization process. But while this was not the case initially, the conflict has also increasingly led to fissures on the basis of ethnicity at the societal level. While much focus has been on Kurdish sentiments, the growth of anti-Kurdish feelings in western Turkey has long escaped attention.

On the external front, the Kurdish issue – and the state's response to it – has been the perhaps largest obstacle, rivaled only by the Cyprus dispute, to Turkey's accession to the European Union. Not staying at this, it has been the chief issue complicating Turkey's relations with its southern and eastern neighbors as well as with the United States. Indeed, the two American military interventions in Iraq – in 1990 and 2003 – did more than anything else to facilitate the creation of a Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq, with powerful implications for Turkey.

Addressing the Kurdish issue is thus perhaps Turkey's paramount concern. In this study, Halil M. Karaveli does not propose to analyze the Kurdish issue per se, something that numerous scholars have already attempted. Rather, Karaveli's purpose is to explain the evolution of the Turkish state's thinking around, and handling of, the Kurdish question. Specifically, he analyzes the tumultuous context and evolution of the 'Kurdish Opening' that the Turkish government has embarked on since 2009. The 'Opening' was marked by numerous obstacles and setbacks; but as Karaveli shows, it was far from the abortive political adventure that it has often made out to be. Indeed, as Karaveli's research amply illustrates, the 'Opening' was the result of a growing pragmatic consensus in Turkey's state institutions – including the powerful intelligence and military bureaucracies – around the urgency of modifying state policy to address the Kurdish question in novel ways.

As this study goes to press, Turkey is teeming with reports of the Turkish state being in direct negotiations with the imprisoned head of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan – something barely conceivable only a few years ago. Whatever the accuracy of these reports – which neither the government nor state institutions have denied – and whatever the outcome of the process, it is clear that the Turkish state has a fundamentally novel approach to the Kurdish issue. Given the ramifications of the issue, the outcome of this process will have a deep effect on both Turkey's domestic politics and foreign relations. Karaveli's study, in advancing our understanding of Turkey's handling of the Kurdish question, will serve as a must-read for observers with an interest in the future of Turkey and its region.

Svante E. Cornell

Research Director

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## Introduction

On July 29, 2009 the government of Turkey unfurled a democratic, or as it came to be known, Kurdish “opening.” Interior minister Beşir Atalay issued an invitation to the public to participate in the search for a solution to the country’s long-standing Kurdish problem: “I call upon all societal and political actors to take part in this process.”<sup>1</sup> The initiative of the government of the Justice and development party (AKP) was an expression of a determination to explore a new path to deal with the Kurdish problem of the Turkish state and to end the quarter century long Kurdish insurgency.

The insurgency started on August 15, 1984, when Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) guerillas launched coordinated attacks on the police stations and army compounds in two counties, Eruh and Şemdinli, in the southeastern provinces of Hakkari and Siirt. The PKK temporarily took control over the two counties, yet the strange events in the remote Southeast were initially not properly appreciated in Ankara; indeed, the assaults did not even make the headlines of the national media until several days later. Prime Minister Turgut Özal dismissed the attackers as ‘brigands’ of little consequence. A quarter century later, the death toll in the struggle that has since raged intermittently between the PKK and the Turkish state stood at more than forty thousand. The Kurdish guerillas had sustained most of those losses, yet it is the Turkish state that has, step by step, been forced to abandon every one of its long held positions on the Kurdish issue.

The PKK insurgency is the longest Kurdish rebellion in the history of the Turkish republic and by far the most consequential one. Since it started, Turkey has gone from denying the existence of the Kurds to recognizing the Kurdish reality. The television of the state that had once banned the Kurdish language is now broadcasting daily in Kurdish. Multiculturalism is to all intents and purposes replacing assimilation as the official stance of the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Devrim Sevimay, “Süreç” – *Kürt Sorununda 29 Temmuz Sonrası Tartışmalar*, Istanbul: Özgür, 2009, p. 292.

And in September 2010, the Turkish state was reported to be negotiating a resolution to the conflict with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.

The ‘Kurdish opening’ had in fact been preceded by an opening – although the term was not employed at the time – at the beginning of the 1990s. In 1991, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel made history when he, as the first Turkish head of government ever, publicly acknowledged the existence of the Kurds, saying, “We recognize the Kurdish reality.” The ban on speaking Kurdish was lifted, and President Turgut Özal suggested that broadcasting in Kurdish ought to be permitted. He even went as far as boldly stating that nothing, including a Turkish-Kurdish federation, was going to be off the table in the search for a resolution of the conflict. As he emphasized Turkey’s cultural diversity Özal in fact laid the foundation to the current endeavor of the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Political scientist Yılmaz Çolak notes that “in a sense, this stance [of Özal] amounted to a repudiation of the reassertion, in the wake of the 1980 coup, of the nationalist project to homogenize the citizens.”<sup>2</sup> Another crucial contribution to the original Kurdish opening was made by Erdal İnönü, the leader of the Social democratic Populist Party (SHP), and later deputy Prime Minister, whose party took the unprecedented initiative in 1991 to form an electoral alliance with the Kurdish People’s Labor party (HEP) to ensure that representatives of the Kurdish movement were elected to parliament that year. The original Kurdish opening was however only to last two years; it was effectively killed off in 1993, when the Constitutional Court banned the HEP. The parliamentarians of the HEP were spectacularly arrested in parliament. A successor party, People’s Democracy party (HADEP) was similarly closed by the Constitutional Court in 2003. In December 2009, a few months after the AKP government had announced its Kurdish opening, the Kurdish Democratic Society party (DTP) met the same fate as its predecessors HEP and HADEP when the Constitutional Court banned it on the grounds that it served as a conduit for the outlawed PKK.

Yet the recurrent attempts of the Turkish state to suppress the Kurdish movement notwithstanding, official state policy has nonetheless continued to evolve along multicultural lines. That evolution was given renewed impetus

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<sup>2</sup> Yılmaz Çolak, *Türkiye’de Devlet’in Kimlik Krizi ve Çeşitlilik*, Ankara: Kadim, 2010, p. 192.

when Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, was handed over to Turkish authorities in 1999 and when Turkey later that year was accepted as a candidate for EU membership. In accordance with the so called Copenhagen criteria of the EU, new laws that broaden the scope of individual, cultural rights were adopted, allowing for Kurdish language publications and for private, Kurdish language courses. In January 2009 the Turkish state television started its daily Kurdish broadcasts. The launch of TRT 6 has been hailed as a “revolutionary” step.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Kurdish opening of the AKP government had initially stalled. Indeed, observers and analysts of Turkey have been quick to write off the initiative as a failure. The opening appeared to have been abandoned when the DTP was closed and when hundreds of Kurdish politicians were subsequently arrested. It was certainly difficult to make sense of the contradictory nature of an ‘opening’ that has included both mass arrests, as well as, recently, negotiations with the leader of the PKK. This paper is an attempt to take stock of the opening during its first year, and it will specifically endeavor to impart an appreciation of its wider, historical and intellectual context. It will make clear that the opening was never “abandoned”; it will argue that the opening, far from being the near-whimsical exercise it had come to appear, does in fact fit into a broader historical pattern, and that it is sustained, concurrently, by a societal evolution that is reshaping Turkey. It has been observed that the rise of Kurdish nationalism is related to a range of societal changes. The Kurdish-dominated Southeast of Turkey is undergoing rapid modernization; urbanization, higher levels of education, dissolution of traditional bonds and the ascendancy of a new middle class have all contributed to the assertion of the Kurdish identity.<sup>4</sup> However, the Turkish state has been confronted with the challenge of coping more generally with an assertive, heterogeneous society. “The most crucial challenge that Turkey has faced during the last twenty years has been to find ways to politically and publicly accommodate the cultural diversity that has become ever more visible,”<sup>5</sup> writes political scientist Çolak. The fact that the Turkish state has been unable to put down the Kurdish insurgency has served to dramatically impress that the republican endea-

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

vor to impose similitude on society has failed. Yet the staying power of the PKK is only one facet of that failure. The conclusion that has imposed itself on the Turkish state after a quarter century of fighting is not only that the insurgency cannot be extinguished, but more fundamentally that the existence of the Kurdish people will have to be taken into proper account. Prompted by the urgency to secure the state, the Kurdish opening is pregnant with a redefinition of what it means to be a citizen of Turkey.

The fate of the state has preoccupied the Turkish ruling elites ever since the Ottoman Empire began to unravel more than two centuries ago. Multi-ethnicity was deemed a threat to the state and it seemed imperative that society be kept cowed. Today, however, socioeconomic changes work to fundamentally rearrange the nature of that particular state-society relationship bequeathed by history. Yet it is nevertheless still the same, perennial challenge that haunts the ruling elite of Turkey: to secure the state in a multi-ethnic setting. Turkey's Kurdish opening is where the past – the heritage of statism – meets the present – the rise of society – to reconcile, ultimately, the state with freedom.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There is a rich, and growing English language and Turkish literature about the history of the modern Turkish state formation. Erik Jan Zürcher offers important insights into the continuity of the state tradition since the era of the Ottoman modernization: "Islam in the service of the National and Pre-National state: The instrumentalisation of Religion for Policy Goals by Turkish regimes between 1880 and 1980," in *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century*, Eds. Celia J. Kerslake, Kerem Öktem and Philip Robins, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. For modern, iconoclastic Turkish scholarship on Kemalism, see *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce*, Cilt 2, *Kemalizm*, ed, Ahmet İnsel, İletişim, İstanbul, 2009. The essay of the British historian Perry Anderson on Kemalism, that studies the relationship of Kemalist nationalism and the question of national minorities, is seminal: "Kemalism," *London Review of Books*, September 11, 2008. It has since been reissued in a collection of essays by Anderson, *The New Old World*, London: Verso, 2009. Turkish historian Taner Akçam's *A shameful act The Armenian Genocide and The Question of Turkish Responsibility*, New York: Holt, 2007, also offers a history of how the Turkish ruling elites have coped with the challenge of multi-ethnicity since the Tanzimat era. For the Kurdish problem in Turkey, see Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998; Metin Heper, *The State and the Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, eds., *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, London: Routledge, 2010. For an account of the ideology and policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), see William Hale and Ergun Özbudun *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey*, London: Routledge, 2010.

## Glasnost à la Turca

Although it was baptized the “Kurdish opening” in the media, the authors of the initiative preferred to refer to it as being part of a wider democratic opening. In an attempt to further downplay the ethnic connotation – and not least in order to counter the nationalist opposition parties who were quick to condemn the opening as a sell-out of the Turkish nation-state – the AKP subsequently chose to qualify it, adding the heading “Project for National unity and brotherhood.” In common parlance however, the initiative has simply come to be referred as the “opening.” Interior minister Beşir Atalay, who was designated the coordinator of the democratic opening, clarified that the initiative had two dimensions, “to broaden democratic rights and to minimize terrorism.”<sup>7</sup> He also stated that “we hold the belief that it will be possible to solve the problem that has come to be termed the Kurdish problem by broadening and securing the democratic rights of our citizens and by ascertaining that every single one of our citizens, regardless of where they reside, come to feel that they are the equal and free citizens of the state.”<sup>8</sup> The opening was indeed to prove an opening in the most literal sense: It was to inspire an unprejudiced public deliberation and discussion of the Kurdish issue as never before in the history of the Turkish republic. Yet the atmosphere in Turkey at the first anniversary of the opening was markedly, and indeed alarmingly, different than the optimistic atmosphere that had prevailed – albeit briefly – a year earlier. Few were prepared to share the rosy appraisal of the Interior minister: “There is a significant sense of relaxation in Turkey,” asserted Atalay. “We can observe how freely everything about this subject is being discussed since the opening was initiated.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the ensuing public debate, however taboo-breaking, had nevertheless contributed, at least initially, not to narrowing, but rather to widening the Turkish-Kurdish rift.

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<sup>7</sup> “Atalay’dan Açılım açıklaması,” *Hürriyet*, 6 November 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Sevimay, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> “Velev ki Habur’da yanlış yaptık,” *Hürriyet*, 12 July, 2010.

From the outset, it had indeed seemed as if Turkey was about to embark quickly on a path that promised to lead away from violence, averting the threat of a wider ethnic conflagration. “God willing, we are going to create a Turkish model that will present an example for the rest of the world,” predicted Atalay.<sup>10</sup> However, during a year of opening, the heavy hand of the state security apparatus had in fact been felt more, not less, in the Kurdish-dominated Southeast of the country, and the PKK had declared a new offensive against the Turkish army in May 2010. Events took yet another turn when the PKK announced a “temporary” cease-fire in August 2010, rekindling the hopes about the possibility of eventually reaching a peace accord between the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement. It signaled that the opening was being offered a new lease on life. There were even clear indications that negotiations between the state and the PKK had gotten under way.

Initially, the PKK had responded to the opening by striking a spectacular blow. On December 7, 2009, seven Turkish soldiers were killed in an ambush in the Reşadiye district of the central Anatolian city of Tokat. Although the PKK assumed responsibility for the attack, its timing led some observers to raise the question if the PKK was in fact being manipulated by shady forces deep within the state establishment who are presumed to oppose the opening.<sup>11</sup> Later, Yalçın Akdoğan, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s chief advisor, observed that the PKK’s escalation of the violence during the run-up to the referendum in September 2010 on the constitutional amendments decided by the AKP majority in parliament had created the impression that the organization acted at the behest of “secret forces,”<sup>12</sup> something, that he pointed out, discredited it among the Kurdish population. However, in contrast to those who suggested that Abdullah Öcalan was in fact in the service of the “deep state,” Akdoğan wrote that the leader of the PKK had on the contrary advised the organization to cease fire because he, unlike his followers, had had the prescience to anticipate the negative impact for the PKK of

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<sup>10</sup> Sevımay, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> There are those who claim that Abdullah Öcalan is in fact being controlled and manipulated by the “deep state.” Neşe Düzel and Kemal Burkay, “Apo, Saddam’ı ve Esad’ı taklit etti,” *Taraf*, 2 August, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, “Eylemsizlik kararı pazarlıkla alınmış değil,” *Star*, 23 August 2010.

being perceived as the tool of the “deep state.”<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning a phenomenon defined as “spoilers” in the peace research literature;<sup>14</sup> guerilla groups in many places around the world have been known to develop vested interests in the perpetuation of conflict, since it allows them to dominate the minority's politics.

It was indeed not the first time that similar, spectacular events had given reason to entertain suspicions about a possible convergence of the interests and actions of the PKK and the “deep state.” In 1993, thirty three, unarmed Turkish soldiers had been massacred in an ambush for which the PKK had assumed responsibility. That attack had sealed the fate of the Kurdish peace initiative that the then president Turgut Özal had been known to contemplate. Instead, the remainder of the 1990's was to be marked by bloody state repression, with thousands of Kurdish civilians being killed by death squads in the Southeast. The inhabitants of four thousand villages were evicted from their homes, becoming internal refugees. The new suspicions that the PKK – whether knowingly or not – was acting on behalf of the Turkish “deep state” were fueled by reports that the General staff had in fact intercepted encrypted messages from the PKK four days prior to the Reşadiye attack. According to the benevolent interpretation, the military had simply been guilty of incompetence, as it was supposedly unable to decode the messages in time and thus prevent the attack from taking place.<sup>15</sup> There were, however, those who saw a much more sinister pattern emerge: According to the liberal daily Taraf, that has played a crucial role in the Turkish debate with its critical reporting about the armed forces' interference in civilian affairs, the military had on several other occasions conspicuously refrained from taking action against the PKK, choosing to stand by and observe as the Kurdish guerillas advanced against the army outposts that they subsequently attacked. Ahmet Altan, the editor-in-chief of Taraf, raised the possibility that the military and the PKK were in fact in collusion in order to ensure that the conflict remains unresolved.<sup>16</sup> The General staff has conspicuously abstained from countering most of these alle-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen J. Stedman, “The Spoiler Problem in Peace Processes,” *International Security*, Vol. 22 no. 2. Fall 1997, 5-53.

<sup>15</sup> “Military intercepted PKK's Resadiye attack message four days prior to assault,” *Today's Zaman*, January 9, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmet Altan, “İktidar ve muhalefet,” *Taraf*, 4 August 2010.

gations.<sup>17</sup> Fikret Bila, a prominent, pro-military journalist, was prompted to deplore this abstention, lamenting that the silence of the General staff contributed to sustaining the impression in the public opinion that there was indeed a truth to what had been alleged by the critics of the military in the media.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, anger and bitterness had continued to mount on both sides of what is arguably Turkey's most fateful, and at that dangerously widening fault line. As the Turks mourned their fallen soldiers as martyrs the same went for the Kurds in the villages and cities east of the Euphrates River, in a Southeast where the recent flicker of hope had been replaced by bitter disappointment. Although the Turkish fallen dead received all the attention and honor in the national, mainstream media, the Kurds were burying an even greater number of PKK militants; the "terrorists" of the Turkish nationalist discourse were their "martyrs." As the two worlds separated by the Euphrates indeed seemed to be increasingly drifting apart, ethnic tensions were on the rise among Turks and Kurds in the rest of Anatolia as well. In July 2010, four police officers were slain in the Dörtyol district of the province of Hatay on the Mediterranean coast, an ambush for which the PKK claimed responsibility. Afterwards, a Turkish nationalist mob attacked and set fire to the local headquarters of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) that has close ties to the PKK. Fighting between Turks and Kurds was averted at the last moment. Similar incidents of inter-communal clashes were reported from other parts of western and southwestern Anatolia, where the Kurdish population has swelled since the 1990's. The Kurdish exodus westward was prompted by the war and notably by the counterinsurgency tactics of the state. As thousands of villages were emptied by the security forces, the evicted inhabitants were compelled to seek shelter in cities like Diyarbakır in the region and to migrate further westward. During the 1990's, millions of Kurds crowded into the suburbs in the west and southwest of the country. Today, these internal immigrants face ethnic discrimination at the hands of their Turkish

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<sup>17</sup> The General staff did issue a statement that disavowed one of these allegations, that the military had deliberately abstained from coming to the rescue of a military unit which was attacked by the PKK on July 20, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Fikret Bila, "TSK'nın karşılaştığı sorun," *Milliyet*, 11 August 2010.



neighbors and they find themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position as Turkish nationalist fervor spreads.<sup>19</sup>

The cities of western Anatolia that have only recently become ethnically mixed, in particular the smaller and middle-sized towns – where the ethnic distinctions are more easily distinguishable than what is the case in the larger metropolises like Istanbul where immigrants tend to be submerged in the crowd – have become propitious terrain for those who would seek to foment ethnic strife. Until recently, Turks and Kurds did not settle apart; indeed, Turkey's fortune has been the lack of ethnic segregation in urban centers. Yet the new wave of migration has brought about a potentially ominous change to this reassuring historic pattern. In cities like Mersin, Antalya and Adana on the Mediterranean coast parallel communities have emerged. The terrain is deemed to be particularly ripe for ethnic strife in those cities where the Kurdish immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Interior minister Beşir Atalay hinted that a hidden hand was attempting to provoke an ethnic conflagration; he suggested that it was opposition to the constitutional amendments of the AKP government that motivated the sinister machinations of such dark forces: “Things are not as straightforward as they seem from the outside,” he stated after a visit to the Dörtöyol district (where the four police officers were slain). “There are those who are seeking to provoke incidents and who want to disrupt the referendum (about the constitutional reform).”<sup>20</sup> A few weeks later, Osman Baydemir, one of the most outspoken Kurdish politicians and the mayor of Diyarbakır, was the target of a botched assassination attempt.

“The Kurd who resides in İzmir, on the Aegean coast, is alarmed, and he has his eyes fixed on the Southeast,” said Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the Kurdish party BDP.<sup>21</sup> In his late thirties, Demirtaş, like Baydemir, represents a new generation of assertive Kurdish politicians. “The Kurds in western Turkey are preparing themselves for the eventuality that they may someday have to seek refuge in the Southeast,” explained Demirtaş.

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<sup>19</sup> Yıldırım Türker, “Dikkat! Irkçılık yükseliyor!,” *Radikal*, 25 July 2010.

<sup>20</sup> “Besir Atalay’dan İnegöl ve Dörtöyol açıklaması,” *Star*, 1 August 2010.

<sup>21</sup> All interviews for this study were conducted in Ankara in April 2010.

The BDP leader observed that “what the opening has achieved so far is that the Kurds’ sense of being the “other” has been aggravated, while the Turks have come to feel more “threatened.” The hopes of the Kurds have diminished a little bit more, and the Turks have become little more nationalistic.” Demirtaş blamed the government for lacking a clearly thought out idea of what it was attempting to achieve with the opening: “At least the government itself should have known what it was going to do and say on given dates, what timetable it was going to follow for the laws it was intending to introduce. If that had been the case, then perhaps it would have been able to explain its policies.”

Indeed, observers whose political perspectives otherwise diverge concurred that the government had been particularly inept at explaining what the opening is really about; the opening was deemed a failure because the government had omitted to enunciate how it was going to move beyond the well-intentioned aim of “silencing the guns.” Ümit Boyner, the chairwoman of Tüsiad, the Association of Turkish businessmen and industrialists, asserted that “the process (of the opening) was disrupted because its contents were never adequately defined.”<sup>22</sup> Özdem Sanberk, the president of the Institute for International Strategic Studies (Uluslararası stratejik araştırmalar enstitüsü, USAK) that has had a key role in the preparation of the opening, similarly noted that “it was important that the process of opening was well appreciated [by the public]; unfortunately that has not proved possible to ensure.”<sup>23</sup> However, the AKP government was not only challenged by the Turkish nationalist opposition; it had equally come to be questioned by some of its liberal supporters as well. In evaluating the opening a year after its announcement, influential, liberal pro-government commentators, who had originally lent enthusiastic support to the opening were at a loss; they were having a hard time making sense of the policies of the government, as the chain of events of the past year, after the opening was launched, seemed to make a mockery of the initial promise of breaking with the past habits of the Turkish state. The influential columnist Cengiz Çandar of the center-left daily *Radikal* had predicted that the opening was destined to continue regardless of any possible,

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<sup>22</sup> “Açılım kötü yönetildi,” *Radikal*, 25 June 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Özdem Sanberk, “Umutsuzluk değil dayanışma zamanı,” *Radikal*, 22 June 2010.

indeed probable setbacks. Less than a year later, he had lost faith, and declared that the opening had not only collapsed, but that it had taken a most unwelcome turn.<sup>24</sup>

In December 2009, the Constitutional court had closed the Democratic society party (DTP), the predecessor of the BDP, and banned its leader Ahmet Türk and Aysel Tuğluk, another of its prominent representatives, from politics for five years. The decision to ban Türk was particularly odd – not least against the backdrop of the promise seemingly held forth by the opening – since the former leader of the DTP is generally viewed and appreciated as a moderate who does not tiptoe to Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK who continues to hold sway over the Kurdish movement from his prison island of İmralı in the Sea of Marmara.

Although the AKP government is obviously not accountable for the rulings of the Constitutional court, it nevertheless remained conspicuously silent with its representatives abstaining from voicing any strong dissent after the closure of the DTP was announced. The same month, in December 2009, mayors and other political representatives of the DTP were rounded up in a police operation in the Southeast that was undertaken against the Kurdistan's Communities Union, (KCK), an organization alleged by the prosecutors to be the PKK's urban arm, civilian branch or alternatively its secret civilian establishment. Arrested, hand-cuffed mayors were lined up in front of the courthouse in Diyarbakır. Their humiliating treatment infuriated Kurdish representatives and agitated liberal Turkish commentators who were puzzled by the turn that the opening had taken. The operation against the KCK had in fact preceded the launch of the opening as the first arrests had taken place already in April 2009. In December 2009 however, the net was cast significantly wider: A year after the first arrests, one thousand and eighty three BDP politicians were being held in custody, including nineteen elected mayors. The mayors of the cities of Batman, Cizre, Kızıltepe, Kayapınar, Sur-Diyarbakır and Viranşehir as well as the president of the Diyarbakır branch of the Association for Human rights were among those who had been incarcerated. The mayor of Diyarbakır was charged when the indictment was presented in June 2010 and

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<sup>24</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Erdoğan Paşa düşünülmezi düşünmeye başlasa," *Radikal*, 13 July 2010.

faces a severe prison sentence if convicted. Although Baydemir has not been arrested, he has been imposed travel restrictions, and he is not allowed to leave Turkey. The round-up of Kurdish elected mayors and other politicians in the Southeast subsequent to the closure of the DTP could not but confirm the suspicion that the AKP government, under the guise of an opening, was in fact primarily seeking to eradicate a rival political force among the Kurdish population. Nothing suggested that the police, which are subordinate to the Interior ministry, had carried out the mass arrests of Kurdish politicians without the prior approval of the political authorities.

The mayor of Diyarbakır accused the government of subjecting the Kurds to the same kind of state oppression under which the Islamic movement itself had once suffered. The ruling AKP, Baydemir claimed, was deploying its own version of a “sledgehammer” in the Southeast, a reference to an infamous military “war-game” in 2003 that had allegedly featured generals and other high ranking military officers plotting the overthrow of the AKP government. While elected politicians were being rounded up in the Southeast, over two thousand Kurdish adolescents remained incarcerated, treated as “terrorists” after having participated in anti-government demonstrations that had turned into riots. The AKP government continued to resist the incessant calls for a revision of the penal code that would have put an end to the misery of the adolescents. Turkish liberal commentators found the reluctance to show leniency in the case of the Kurdish children incomprehensible, and difficult to reconcile with the spirit of the opening. They were particularly confused, as they had assumed that the AKP government had had in mind a reconciliation of sorts with the PKK. Cengiz Çandar wrote “was not the democratic opening ultimately intended as a way of inducing the PKK, to disarm and disband, by peaceful means, opening up the possibility for the PKK and for those who are influenced by it, to participate in legal political life? Did not welcoming back those who left the mountains of the Southeast and the Kandil mountain [in northern Iraq], and those who were to return from Europe, amount to saying, you are free, and you can now take part in legal politics?”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, that very expectation mirrored the nationalists’ reverse reading of the opening, except

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<sup>25</sup> Cengiz Çandar, “Tehlike’nin adresi, Washington? Diyarbakır? Ankara?”, *Radikal*, 15 June 2010.

that the expectation of the liberals was what terrified the nationalists. Those expectations and fears respectively seemed to have been confirmed when thirty four PKK militants arrived at the Habur frontier outpost on October 22, 2009, and were allowed to enter Turkey.

### **A “Road Accident”**

The PKK militants had presented themselves at the Habur frontier outpost on the instructions of Abdullah Öcalan. The Turkish government had made prior, but what was to be very soon apparent, inadequate, preparations for their admittance to Turkey. Present on the historic occasion were high level bureaucrats, among whom the under-secretary of state of the Interior ministry, the governor of Şırnak, representatives of MİT (The National intelligence Agency) judges and prosecutors. The PKK militants stated that they were not intending to make use of the possibility, offered by Turkish law, to express penitence, making them eligible for lower prison sentences. They were not surrendering; they were claiming their right to enter Turkey as free citizens. Making their entrance in their guerilla attires, they made sure that their defiance was publicly well advertised.

In the eyes of the Turkish nationalist opposition and the Turkish public the presence of official representatives of the state created the impression that the Kurdish militants were being bestowed the welcome, indeed even the benediction, of the state. Then, the militants were greeted as heroes by tens if not hundreds of thousands of jubilant Kurds. In the western parts of Turkey, the triumphant tour of the PKK militants was viewed as an intolerable affirmation of Kurdish nationalism and provoked a Turkish nationalist outrage against the opening. The welcome accorded to the Kurdish militants – the fact that the law enforcement authorities had allowed them to freely enter the country at all – seemed to justify the claims of the nationalist opposition parties that the Kurdish opening amounted to an appeasement of the PKK, indeed to an outright surrender to its demands.

The Habur entrance was a defining moment, a turning point; the polls showed the support for the AKP declining substantially after the Habur events. The Habur episode had a significantly negative impact on public support for the opening: Polls taken at the time of the launch of the opening had

put support at 45.6 percent. In October, after the welcome of the PKK militants, it had slipped to 32.1 percent. In December it was down to 27.1 percent. Support among AKP voters had declined from 70.7 percent in the summer of 2009 to 47.5 percent in December 2009. It is however worth noting that support remained at a high level among the voters of the Kurdish DTP: It had declined only slightly, from 83.6 percent to 78.8 percent at the end of 2009.<sup>26</sup> A poll taken in July 2010 put the support for the democratic opening at 39.6 percent, five percentage points less than what had been the case a month earlier.<sup>27</sup>

“Habur will be the prime asset of the opposition Republican people’s party (CHP) in the next election,” Fikret Bila of the daily *Milliyet* assured. However, the AKP government has since tried hard to make up for its initial, fatal mistake, seeking to assuage the enraged Turkish electorate, even at the expense of further alienating the Kurdish electorate. In what amounted to a symbolic rectification of the impression that the government had inadvertently given during the initial phase of the opening, thirty of the thirty four PKK militants who had been allowed to enter Turkey in October 2009 were indicted in June 2010. By then, ten of the thirty four returnees had been imprisoned, while the others who were indicted faced severe prison sentences ranging between fifteen and twenty years.

Assessing the results that the opening had yielded, Interior minister Beşir Atalay called Habur “a road accident.” “We tried very hard to avoid it. Two days before (the arrivals) we spoke to Ahmet Türk (the leader of the DTP). I said, “Please, don’t do anything that will harm this process.” “Nothing unpleasant that will distress you will happen,” he assured me. Much effort was put into avoiding what happened until the very last moment, but to no avail.”

<sup>28</sup> Atalay spoke even more harshly about the DTP in another interview: The interior minister claimed that the DTP had delivered the fatal blow to the opening by “exploiting” the Habur entrance. “I had my first meeting with

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<sup>26</sup> Devrim Sevimay, “Açılım sürecinde hata oldu ama hala umut var,” *Milliyet*, 25 July 2010.

<sup>27</sup> “İşte son anket sonuçları,” *Habertürk*, 15 August 2010.

<sup>28</sup> “Velev ki Habur’da yanlış yaptık,” *Hürriyet*, 12 July 2010.

Ahmet Türk. I asked him to become our official interlocutor. But they gathered all the people in buses at Habur.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had at the time expressed his utter disappointment at how the returnees had been greeted: “Is this sincerity? Is this a scene that befits those who are responsible? How is it possible to put up such a show?”<sup>30</sup> Erdoğan apparently felt let down; his words confirmed that the Turkish government had been in prior, indirect contact with the PKK, and that it had been led to believe that it had received guarantees of “responsible” behavior from those interlocutors.

In hindsight, such an expectation seemed almost naïve; above all, however, it was an expression of overconfidence. The Turkish government appears to have concluded that it had the PKK on the ropes. It seems to have assumed that the Kurdish organization, or at least a significant part of it, was ready to surrender and let the state dictate a resolution of the conflict: “This is what the (Habur) arrivals were about,” explained Beşir Atalay: “People shall come and declare that they have left the organization [the PKK].”<sup>31</sup>

One of the intellectual architects of the opening is İhsan Bal, who lectures at the Police academy in Ankara and who serves as a director at the USAK think-tank in Ankara where some of the preparation for the opening had taken place. Bal commented that the government had mistakenly assumed that it had discovered an easy short cut to the solution of the Kurdish problem: “They presumed that they could just bring in the terrorists, and solve the problem with a simple stroke,” he told me. Yet Erdoğan’s disbelief at the sight of the jubilant Kurdish masses suggested that the Prime Minister had misread not only the PKK, but even more importantly that he had failed to make a proper judgment of the mood of the Kurdish population in general, notably underestimating the persistent strength of Kurdish nationalism. The government had assumed that it would be the master of events; instead events on the ground threatened to escape control and seemed poised to get dangerously out of hand.

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<sup>29</sup> “Açılıma en büyük darbeyi BDP vurdu,” *Star*, 7 July 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, “AKP’nin açılım fiyaskosu,” 2010, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> “Velev ki Habur’da yanlış yaptık,” *Hürriyet*, 12 July 2010.

## The Gorbachev Syndrome

Indeed, it did not seem far-fetched to draw an inauspicious parallel to another, ill-fated attempt at “opening” – the “glasnost,” openness, and “perestroika,” restructuring, that was introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union a quarter century ago. Seeking ultimately to save the Soviet state, Gorbachev had invited the public to voice its criticism of the totalitarian system; a freer deliberation of societal and political issues would, so he expected, put pressure on those parts of the bureaucratic apparatus that were objecting to change. Gorbachev had of course failed to anticipate that an avalanche of criticism would pour through the gate that he had flung open, precipitating the fall of the Communist party from power and the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Erdoğan had similarly, indeed literally, opened a gate – at Habur – for the potentially overwhelming aspirations of a people that had been oppressed and did not hesitate to take advantage of what appeared like the hope of freedom suddenly offered by the state.

Drawing a parallel to the fate of Gorbachev, one prominent liberal intellectual, Etyen Mahçupyan, cautioned that any attempt to introduce reforms that tinker with an authoritarian status quo invariably risks to yield chaos: “If you lack the instruments to master such a chaos, then the tendencies of disintegration can carry you in directions that you had not desired nor anticipated; in which case, you will be forced to either pull the breaks on reform, or indeed reverse it. This was the fate that befell Gorbachev as he attempted the restoration of the Soviet Union through glasnost and perestroika.<sup>32</sup>”

The opening was predicated on the very notion that the aspirations of the Kurdish population could be channeled in a direction that was congruent with the overriding concern of securing the state, very much like Mikhail Gorbachev had sought to mobilize – and control – the popular desire for freedom in the ultimate interest of the state. The Kurdish opening relied on the assumption that it was going to prove possible to differentiate between those Kurds – presumed to be a minority – that support the PKK and the so called “real” Kurds. This was a crucial flaw; the reasoning behind this assumption will be further elaborated in a subsequent chapter.

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<sup>32</sup> Etyen Mahçupyan, “Gorbaçov sendromu,” *Taraf*, 6 November 2010.



The Turkish government had apparently failed to predict not only the Kurdish reactions to the opening, but seems equally to have been unprepared for the ferociously hostile reception of the Turkish nationalist opposition parties, and subsequently of the Turkish public. There were also Turkish nationalist critics within the ruling party itself. Interior minister Atalay claimed that the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) had initially been "very forthcoming." "I spoke to Baykal (the then leader of the CHP). Initially, he was in a very helpful mood," he asserted.<sup>33</sup> Atalay's recollection suggests that he thinks that the CHP was scared away from lending public support to the opening after the DTP "exploited" the opening. However, that is an interpretation that hardly holds water. The "exploitation" to which Atalay refers did not occur until after the Habur entrance of the PKK militants. That was in October 2010. The nationalist opposition parties, the Kemalist CHP and the far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) did not wait until that moment to condemn the opening; they had in fact assailed the initiative from the very day of its announcement, more than two months before any jubilant Kurdish masses had gathered on the roads and streets of southeast Turkey to offer their welcome to homecoming PKK militants.

Ümit Boyner, chairwoman of the Association of Turkish industrialists and businessmen, held that "we can observe the extent to which the opening, and hence society, has been damaged both by the unconditional support (lent to the opening) and by an opposition that has been motivated by a stubborn logic of refusal."<sup>34</sup> It was certainly true that the original pleas of the authors of the opening hand went unheeded by the Turkish nationalist opposition. On July 29, 2009, Interior Minister Atalay had implored the opposition not to sabotage the initiative of the state: "Please, we expect that everyone will realize that it is crucial to make constructive contributions to this process and will abstain from being destructive." The Interior minister had gone on to underline that "we believe that the sectors (of society) will refrain from taking stances and from carrying out acts that sabotage this process."<sup>35</sup> Atalay claimed that the government was not acting according to any clearly preconceived road-map; rather, he sought to impress that the government was requisitioning the ad-

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<sup>33</sup> "Açılıma en büyük darbeyi BDP vurdu," *Star*, 7 July 2010.

<sup>34</sup> "Açılım kötü yönetildi," *Radikal*, 25 June 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Sevımay, p. 294.

vice of all walks of society: “First of all, I wish to emphasize that the work that has begun has not yet been concluded, and that no final decision has been arrived at.”<sup>36</sup>

İhsan Bal claimed that the government lacked a clear idea of where the opening was ultimately headed: “The government has the determination to solve the problem, but as far as I can tell, it doesn’t have any road-map,” he insisted.<sup>37</sup> “The opening is an expression of an inquisitive stance on the part of the government,” he told me. “It is about trying to understand what the real (popular) demands are; are for instance the Kurds bent on a divorce from Turkey?” He went as far as to suggest that the parliamentarians of the AKP were in fact clueless about the opening: “They cannot give you any satisfactory answers about the opening, since ultimately, the demand for change is not a government-driven project.” Bal described the Interior minister himself as being a listener, rather than a lecturer: At a workshop entitled “Toward a Turkish model for the solution of the Kurdish problem,” where some of the country’s leading journalists participated, Atalay’s role “was only that of a listener” who just wanted to hear out the proposals of those present. “It was a discussion where those who stood for the invitation said almost nothing, while those who were invited were given the maximum opportunity to express their viewpoints.”<sup>38</sup> However, the journalists who were present at that particular occasion hailed exclusively from pro-government media outlets. Bal defended the choice of hearing out only politically biased advice: “It is only natural that only those who desire a solution are invited to a workshop where you are going to discuss how a solution will look like.”<sup>39</sup> Prominent nationalist, anti-government journalists were nevertheless invited to a subsequent workshop with the media, but they notably declined the invitation.

The present leader of the Kemalist CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who was then the deputy chairman of the party’s parliamentary group, held that it did not make any sense to invite the political parties and others to make contributions to the process while the government itself, he alleged, abstained from present-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>37</sup> Neşe Düzel and İhsan Bal, “İspanya’daki “kısmi af” gelebilir,” *Taraf*, 14 November 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

ing any concrete ideas: "I presume that the AKP government reasoned along these lines: "Let us invite the public to discuss the Kurdish problem, without first committing ourselves to any particular set of policies. Then, we can as government decide upon a road-map, in light of what has transpired during these discussions." "Such an approach will not contribute to the process; absent concrete suggestions there can be no discussion among the political parties. Instead everyone will be induced to harden his own viewpoints and beliefs," predicted Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>40</sup> He was indeed proven right. Initially, however, a substantial majority of the voters of CHP, as well as of the MHP, expressed support for the opening: 73, 4 percent of the CHP voters and 68, 4 percent of the MHP voters supported the Kurdish initiative.<sup>41</sup> That support had evaporated a few months later, at the end of 2009, when a dismal 8, 9 percent of the CHP voters and 6 percent of the MHP voters stated that they were in favor of the opening. The dramatic decline was clearly attributable to the welcome that was accorded to the 34 homecoming PKK militants in October 2009 and which had infuriated the Turkish nationalist public. The initial support attested to the yearning in society for an end to the quarter century long undeclared civil war that transcended ethnic and ideological confines. The conclusion that imposes itself is that the opening appealed to widely different political constituencies as long as its specifics, beyond silencing the guns, remained unpronounced or poorly appreciated.

### **A Leap in the Dark?**

In a basic sense, the AKP government had indeed introduced a strikingly novel approach with the Kurdish opening, departing from one particularly defining custom of Turkish political culture: Turkey was certainly not accustomed to the specter of representatives of the state humbly seeking out the advice of the citizenry. Some of the statements of the Interior minister almost conveyed an impression of innocence. "Everything that has so far been written about the subject, books, articles and reports are kept in our archive, and we are busy studying them all in detail," Atalay assured.<sup>42</sup> It conjured up the

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<sup>40</sup> Sevimay, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Devrim Sevimay, "Açılım sürecinde hata oldu ama hala umut var," *Milliyet*, 25 July 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Sevimay, p. 295.

image of a government diligently applying itself to the humble study of the subject. Yet the pretense – because it was indeed to certain extent a pretense – of humility also made the government vulnerable for the charges of the opposition that it was being irresponsible, that it had jeopardized the state, as it had supposedly embarked on a dangerous course without a chart to abide by.

However, to the advocates of the opening, it seemed an advantage to claim that there was no road-map: the openness of the process would, so the reasoning went according to İhsan Bal, who was cited above, enable the government to correctly interpret – and, implicitly, to subsequently channel to its own benefit – societal aspirations. Yet the opening was nevertheless not the leap in the dark that the professed open-minded approach of its authors misled several commentators to conclude that it was, and that was arraigned by critics such as the CHP's Kılıçdaroğlu. Asked in July 2009, when the opening was launched, if the government was envisioning any constitutional amendments as part of the process, Interior minister Beşir Atalay notably hinted that that prospect was indeed being considered in the long run: “Every possibility is taken into consideration during a preparation, the short-term, medium-term and in the long-term. There are those things that can be done right away, without changing any laws. Then there are those measures that call for legal amendments.”<sup>43</sup>

In the short-term, the AKP government was going to enact administrative changes that would enable language courses in Kurdish (as well as in other local languages) and that would restore the original names to villages and counties in compliance with the wishes of their inhabitants.<sup>44</sup> In its attempt to homogenize Anatolia and to efface the memory of its multi-ethnic past, the Turkish state had meticulously renamed villages, counties and cities that evoked a non-Turkish heritage. Indeed, the founder of the republic, Kemal Atatürk, had taken a deep personal interest in the matter, applying himself to renaming, among others, Diyarbakır to Diyarbakır – a linguistic “correction” intended to emphasize the cities’ supposed Turkishness – and Dersim, the site of a major Kurdish rebellion in 1937-1938, to Tunceli. In the medium-term, le-

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<sup>43</sup> Sevimay, p. 299.

<sup>44</sup> Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, “Soruları ve cevaplarıyla Demokratik Açılım süreci,” Ankara: AKP Tanıtım ve Medya Başkanlığı, 2010, p. 120.

gal amendments were called for; the AKP proposed that political campaigning in languages other than Turkish be allowed, and that the original names be restored to cities and provinces as well.<sup>45</sup> And, “the long-term aim is that Turkey is supplied with a civilian and democratic constitution.”<sup>46</sup> The last point seemed to imply that the AKP was in fact no stranger to ultimately challenging the Turkish nationalist framework of the current constitution, which requires that the Kurds call themselves Turks.<sup>47</sup>

Rather than assuming that the government was muddling through, and somewhat improbably conjuring it as passively awaiting societal actors to take the lead and show the way toward a solution, the opening should be perceived within a framework of evolving state-society reciprocity. “While historically, ever since the Tanzimat era (1839 to 1876, when the Ottoman Empire began its modernization), the call for change has always emanated from the top, change is today flowing from below, with the people forcing it,” İhsan Bal impressed. Ultimately, the opening was a harbinger of a reversal of state-society relations: the Turkish state no longer commanded society as before, and the AKP government, as well as several other agents of state power, recognized this as a fact. “There is a growing appreciation that the state exists for the benefit of its citizens,” Bal told me. “We are speaking of a Turkey that pays taxes, that produces growth, which has productive working and middle classes, and which has come to question the state.” Basically, the state was attempting to cope with change, adapting itself to new circumstances that necessarily imposed a certain humbleness on it. But the authors of the opening did nevertheless act according to a preconceived blueprint. However, they trusted that summoning societal actors to participate in the deliberation of the Kurdish issue would eventually yield the realization of what had been enunciated, as well as of what was only being hinted at by the government. In the words of Interior minister Atalay, the government was committing itself to policies that presupposed “trust in society.”<sup>48</sup>

Yet in a sense, and concurrently, the government in fact did not trust society. Besides revealing an appreciation of a changed reality that imposed restraints

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>47</sup> This issue will be further developed in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Sevımay, p. 291.

on state power, it is likely that the assurances that the opening was going to be an open process – with the government paying attention to every opinion and participant in the deliberation – were intended equally to “veil” the opening, so as to ensure that Turkish nationalism was not aroused. If the government was indeed trying to avoid provoking a nationalist backlash – which seems probable --by choosing to remain somewhat opaque about the ultimate direction of the opening, in a sense enticing the Turkish nationalist public to believe that there was nothing to worry about, it failed. The nationalists were not fooled. Ultimately, the very “openness” of the Kurdish initiative of the government had the adverse effect of fueling suspicions and inviting the wildest of speculations and conspiracy theories.

Yılmaz Ateş, who was then one of the deputy chairmen of the Kemalist CHP, explained to this author that the AKP government had launched the opening at the behest of its American “patron.” “AKP did this because America demanded it,” he assured me. That is indeed a common assumption among secularist nationalist circles. The deputy chairman of the CHP claimed that the U.S. was seeking to “save the PKK guerillas” as it was allegedly an American aim to establish a Kurdish state in the region that would serve as a point of support alongside Israel. Ateş reminded me of how, as he described it, the Western powers had sought to “evict us from Anatolia” after the First World War, implying that the American designs had since remained unchanged. Neither did he find it in any way odd that the Turkish government had acquiesced to the American demands. “The AKP obeys the U.S. in order to be able to establish its religious state,” he claimed without any hesitation. Supposedly, the U.S. was lending support to the ‘Islamization’ of Turkey in exchange for having the Kurdish part of Turkey handed over to its Kurdish protégées in northern Iraq.

### **The Ghosts of History**

Onur Öymen, a former ambassador and another deputy chairman of the CHP at the time, drew anger and resentment – including from within his own party – when he assailed the opening as a concession to terrorism. In a speech delivered in parliament in November 2009, Öymen questioned the very aim of silencing the guns so that “mothers no longer need to cry,” an oft repeated

phrase used by the government to legitimize the opening. Öymen, a die-hard secularist Turkish nationalist, had no stomach for sentimentality. “Did not mothers also cry at the time of the Sheikh Said rebellion? Did not mothers also cry at the time of the Dersim rebellion?” Öymen rhetorically asked.<sup>49</sup> He was referring to the first Kurdish rebellion after the founding of the republic, in 1925; and to a subsequent Kurdish rebellion in the province of Dersim in 1937 that took the Turkish state more than a year to put down. However, Öymen was not referring to the mothers of the thousands who were killed by the Turkish army and air force, but to the mothers of the Turkish soldiers who, in his view, had fought a noble battle for the fatherland against treacherous insurgents. Although the exact number of victims remains uncertain, it is beyond dispute that Turkish government forces did perpetrate wide-scale massacres of non-combatants. Tens of thousands were almost certainly killed. The Alevi Kurds in the Dersim region, writes historian Perry Anderson, “were put down yet more ruthlessly (than the insurgents in 1925), with more modern weapons of destruction – bombers, gas, heavy artillery.”<sup>50</sup> Sabiha Gökçen, one of Kemal Atatürk’s adopted daughters and Turkey’s first female pilot – and as such a venerated hero of Kemalism – notably distinguished herself during the prolonged bombing campaign of the Turkish Air force. As he made the historical comparison to Dersim, Öymen appeared to be urging the Turkish state to be just as unwavering in its response to “terrorism” today as it had been in 1925 and in 1937. At the very least, he had displayed what many critics deemed to be an outrageous insensitivity to the plight and memory of the countless civilian victims.

The horrors of Dersim remain an open sore in the region to this day, but the rebellion and its violent suppression have been glossed over in the official historiography of the republic.<sup>51</sup> Inadvertently, the deputy chairman of the CHP

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<sup>49</sup> “Öymen’s Dersim remarks draw ire of Alevis,” *Tofay’s Zaman*, 13 November 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Perry Anderson, *Kemalism*, *London Review of Books*, September 11, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> The uprising in Dersim and the way it was dealt with is notably passed over in the English-language biographies of Atatürk as well. These generally stick close to official Turkish historiography. Patrick Kinross does not mention it all in his classic “Atatürk, The rebirth of a nation” (Phoenix, 2005), while Andrew Mango only makes a very short reference in his otherwise richly detailed “Atatürk” (John Murray, 1999) that exculpates the president. Mango conveys the impression that the leaders of the rebellion were put to the death by the authorities without the knowledge of Atatürk, when he

had opened up the Pandora's box. His remarks called attention to a historical crime that the republic had committed toward its own citizens, but which has never been acknowledged as such. However, Turkey appears far from ready to fully face its history; indeed, the Kurdish opening is less radical than was Glasnost in the former Soviet Union. Gorbachev had encouraged the public in the Soviet Union to talk openly about the crimes that had been committed by the formerly glorified leaders of the state, not sparing Lenin and Stalin. In Turkey, allegations of Atatürk's responsibility for mass killings still had to be circumvented. However, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan nevertheless came conspicuously close to implicating the founding father: Erdoğan chose to fulminate against the CHP, the party of Atatürk: "Who was it that bombed the villages of Dersim because the villagers had failed to pay their taxes?" he asked. "They were bombed on the orders of the president of the time. And who was president then? It was İsmet İnönü, who was the leader of the CHP. Thus, it was in fact the CHP that bombed. It is said that twenty, thirty, forty, fifty thousand people were executed. This is your record. Come and clean this up," he exhorted the CHP.<sup>52</sup> As Atatürk remains unassailable, Erdoğan had heaped the blame for the calamities in Dersim on İnönü, who was in fact not president at the time.

Although history still could not be fully told, the descendants of the Alevi Kurdish rebels in Dersim were no longer hiding in the shadows, remembering, and suffering the pain of memory, in bitter silence. In the summer of 2010, a statue of Seyit Rıza, the leader of the Dersim rebellion who was hanged, was defiantly erected in a park that was named after him in the city of Tunceli (to which the name of the Dersim province was changed by Atatürk himself after the rebellion had been put down). And one prominent native of Tunceli had spoken out against Öymen: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who was later to become the chairman of the CHP, was first among those who harshly criticized his party colleague; he had initially even called for Öymen's resignation, but had subsequently been forced to backtrack. Kılıçdaroğlu is himself an Alevi Kurd and hails from Tunceli; that presumably would have given him a victim's perspective on the Kemalist endeavor – defended by the CHP – to homogenize, by

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writes that they were summarily hanged before the president arrived to the area. (Mango, p. 517f) Mango does not make any mention of civilian casualties.

<sup>52</sup> "Erdoğan: Dersim'i CHP bombaladı," *Radikal*, 14 August 2010.



force if necessary, the ethnic and cultural diversity of Anatolia. But Kılıçdaroğlu had strayed too far when he called for the resignation of Öymen, and was quickly called to order by the party leadership that closed ranks around Öymen, and by implication around the ideological stance that he had defended somewhat too outspokenly. “The Dersim example wasn’t pretty at all,” deemed Deniz Baykal, the leader of the CHP.<sup>53</sup> Yet the basic tenets of the Turkish nationalism, laid down by Atatürk in the 1920’s and the 1930’s nevertheless essentially remained sacrosanct for the CHP, and Kılıçdaroğlu seemed to have internalized that they were not to be fundamentally challenged.

After being elected the leader of the CHP in May 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu has taken care not to give the impression that he is about to pursue the line with which his criticism of Onur Öymen’s infamous Dersim statements seemed to have been pregnant. Nonetheless, he has continued to call for the abolition of the 10 percent threshold to parliament which was introduced by the generals who authored the present constitution of Turkey in 1982, with the explicit intention of barring Kurdish parties from gaining parliamentary representation. And he subsequently reiterated his call for a “general amnesty” – which would presumably include the PKK militants – that he had proposed in a speech in the city of Batman in the Kurdish Southeast in early 2010, before he was elected party leader, and for which he had been duly criticized by the party leadership. Aside from this, however, Kılıçdaroğlu refrained from breaking ranks with Turkish nationalist orthodoxy. That made sense politically, at least in the short run, since he has yet to firmly establish his credentials among the nationalist core base of the CHP. However, Kılıçdaroğlu risks foreclosing the possibility of successfully arguing for a more liberal approach to the Kurdish issue if he caves in too much to Turkish xenophobia. Arguably, he ventured way too far in the direction of appeasing Turkish nationalism when he cursed the opening, damning it as a policy that supposedly paved the way for the disintegration of Turkey.<sup>54</sup> After four police officers were slain in the district of Dört Yol in July 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu asserted that “it was the opening that

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<sup>53</sup> “Öymen’s Dersim remarks draw ire of Alevi,” *Today’s Zaman*, 13 November 2009.

<sup>54</sup> “Kürt Açılımı politikalarına lanet okuyoruz,” *haberaktuel.com*, 6 June 2010.

caused Dörtüol.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, that may very well have been the case, but not in the sense that Kılıçdarođlu wanted his Turkish nationalist audience to understand.

CHP leader Kılıçdarođlu has shied from recognizing that the Kurdish issue is about the affirmation of an identity, indeed never even pronouncing the word Kurd in his public speeches, preferring to seek refuge in conventional Turkish nationalist wishful thinking. According to this line of thought, the Kurdish problem is supposedly provoked by economic deprivation, and would be solved – i.e., the Kurds would be satisfied with not being considered as Kurds – if only they were economically rewarded. Bülent Ecevit, the late Prime Minister and former CHP leader whom Kılıçdarođlu has adopted as a role model, famously used to blame the PKK problem on the survival of the feudal system and on the economic deprivation of the Kurdish masses. Initially, the PKK had in fact been a revolt against the Kurdish feudal structure, but has long since morphed into a nationalist movement. That evolution was brought about when the Turkish state essentially endorsed the “aghas,” the feudal lords, of the Southeast; furthermore, the end of the Cold war removed the communist ideological leg of the PKK, forcing it to rely ever more heavily on its Kurdish nationalist identity. The Kurdish issue is now clearly driven by modern, nationalist dynamics that have little to do with feudalism. Kılıçdarođlu failed to take that evolution into account when he in an anachronistic vein, reminiscent of the stance of Ecevit, reiterated that “the position of the CHP is that the state needs to invest in the area and set up factories.”<sup>56</sup> Political scientist Ali Çarkođlu of the Sabancı University observed that it has already been proven that economic measures fall short of solving the Kurdish problem. “The AKP has spent a huge amount of money, 12 billion U.S. dollars on investments in the Southeast, but that hasn’t solved the problem,” he reminded.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the national consciousness of the Kurds had grown with the decline of feudalism in the Southeast and the rise of a new, Kurdish middle class.

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<sup>55</sup> “Kılıçdarođlu: İktidara geldiđimizde Büyükankıt’ı yargılayacađız,” *Milliyet*, 29 July 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Sevımay, p. 83.

<sup>57</sup> Devrim Sevımay, “CHP’nin hedefi Ümraniye olmalı,” *Milliyet*, June 2, 2010.

## **A House Divided**

As far as the Kurds went, the Kurdish problem had been resolved, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the BDP, assured me. “The Kurds have solved their Kurdish problem,” he stated. The “problem” had been the lack of a strong national sentiment among the Kurdish population. “Until fifteen to twenty years ago, being a Kurd was something bad,” Demirtaş said. “People were not ashamed of their Kurdishness, but Kurdishness had for so long been the object of official derision and oppression that a strong sense of national pride had not yet developed. People chose not to emphasize their Kurdishness, since doing so only invited trouble.” The leader of the BDP claimed that the core issue was that the Kurdish people are recognized as a distinct people. “The state must regard this people as a people. That is the fundamental issue which is at stake.” While the Kurdish opening could seem opaque in its contours, the demands of the Kurdish national movement were as straightforward and unequivocal as anything went. At the core of these demands lay the call for Turkish-Kurdish equality. The representatives of the Kurdish movement demanded that the Kurds be viewed as the equals of the Turks as the proprietors of the republic of Turkey. And that in turn basically boiled down to the question of language. Demirtaş insisted that “equality is to be able to use one’s own language. “The greatest misfortune of the Kurdish people is that it has been denied education in its own language,” he said. Article 42 of the Turkish constitution establishes that no Turkish citizen can receive education in any mother tongue other than Turkish. That wording left open for the possibility of instruction in Kurdish, as had always been the case with the instruction of foreign languages, but shut the door for a Kurdish language curriculum. In fact, the most prestigious schools in Turkey are those where education is dispensed in English, French and German. The unstated, yet specific aim of Article 42 is to prohibit education in Kurdish. The restrictions against the use of other languages than Turkish in the public realm, in political rallies, were equally repugnant, as was notably the article 66 of the constitution of Turkey that laid down that “everyone who is bound to Turkey by bonds of citizenship is a Turk.” Turkish nationalists defend that that is in fact to be understood as an ‘inclusive’ definition of nationhood. They maintain that Turkish nationalism is not defined by ethnicity. The Kurds have indeed been included in the Turkish nation, and were not discriminated against and were spared

persecution – as long as they refrained from displaying their Kurdish identity. Turkish nationalism does not qualify as civic, non-ethnic, inclusive nationalism, as it enforces a specific, Turkish identity as the sole norm, and postulates that everyone will be “happy to call himself/herself a Turk.”

The BDP called for an abolition of the 10 percent threshold to parliament, which was designed explicitly to ensure that no Kurdish party could gain parliamentary representation. Strong showings in local constituencies nevertheless assured that representatives of the Kurdish movement who stood as independents could make it to parliament, but the threshold did evidently contribute to significantly restricting the electoral appeal of their parties. In the general election in 2007, the AKP had attracted two thirds of the Kurdish voters in the Southeast, a success that was in large measure attributed to the fact that Kurdish voters preferred not to waste their votes on a party (the DTP) that had little chance of reaching above the 10 percent barrier. In the local elections in 2009, the DTP fared notably better, attracting around 2.5 million votes. The latest polls put the support nationwide for DTP’s successor party, the BDP, at around 6 percent. “The fundamental problem is that the AKP does not truly understand the problem,” BDP leader Demirtaş asserted. He claimed that the representatives of the AKP had belatedly come to appreciate that the Kurdish issue was much more complicated than what they had initially assumed. Essentially, what he was saying was that the AKP government had been forced to realize that there could be no solution that did not take the PKK into account.

Above all, the fate of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the PKK, figured most prominently among the demands of the Kurdish movement. Demirtaş was explicit about the matter, telling me that “the PKK and Öcalan somehow have to be involved,” as they were “the natural interlocutors of any dialogue and negotiation.” A secret dialogue between the Turkish state and its most prominent prisoner has in fact been ongoing, with high ranking officials of the National Intelligence Agency (MİT) paying regular visits to Öcalan’s cell.<sup>58</sup> However, what had been carried on was described not as negotiations, but rather as a dialogue that aimed at securing Öcalan’s acquiescence to end to

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<sup>58</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “PKK’da neler oluyor?,” *Milliyet*, 16 August 2010.

violence.<sup>59</sup> In August 2010, Murat Karayılan, the acting leader of the PKK, claimed that the decision to announce a temporary cease-fire had been prompted by the pleas of the state and had been arrived at after an understanding subsequently had been reached between the state and the PKK. Prime Minister Erdoğan denied the allegations, on which the Turkish nationalist opposition predictably had seized, with vehemence. He stated that “the AKP government sitting down at a table and negotiating with any terrorist organization is out of the question, and neither will any such thing happen in the future.”<sup>60</sup> The Prime Minister’s chief advisor, Yalçın Akdoğan, similarly professed that the government was not “dealing with or negotiating with an organization like the PKK.” However, he then went on to write that “the relevant institutions of the state are of course going to have a dialogue with a prisoner in a state prison.”<sup>61</sup>

The Turkish state was in all evidence continuing its “dialogue” with Öcalan; the key question was if and when that dialogue was going to evolve into a regular negotiation. The assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, the ground was being prepared for future, open negotiations with the Kurdish movement. Indeed, it was noteworthy that Erdoğan’s chief advisor lavished praise on Öcalan, honoring his three recent contributions to the advancement of a solution: Akdoğan enumerated Öcalan’s recommendation to PKK to cease fire, his call for letting the Kurdish people make up its own mind in the referendum on the constitutional amendments (the BDP had urged the Kurds to boycott the vote) and finally his suggestion that the moderate Ahmet Türk, the widely respected, former leader of the closed Democratic society party (DTP) be elected the chairman of the Democratic society congress, an off-shot of the Kurdish movement.<sup>62</sup> The statement of the chief advisor of Prime Minister Erdoğan did not necessarily divulge any intention to elevate Öcalan to an official interlocutor. It was more reasonable to assume that the public courting of Öcalan was prompted by electoral considerations; what imported above all for the AKP government at that political juncture was to secure the support of the Kurdish voters in the September 12, 2010 referendum

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<sup>59</sup> “Eski MİT yöneticisi Apo’yla görüşmeleri anlattı,” *Taraf*, 15 August 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Murat Yetkin, “Kart kurttan PKK’yla görüşmeye,” *Radikal*, 21 August 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, “Eylemsizlik kararı pazarlıkla alınmış değil,” *Star*, 23 August 2010.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

on constitutional amendments. Yet a critical, psychological threshold may nevertheless have been crossed; whether or not on purpose, Abdullah Öcalan had *de facto* come to be officially recognized as an indispensable political actor. As it announced its temporary cease-fire that was to last until the referendum had been held, the PKK reiterated its demands, a halt to the operations of the Turkish army, the release of the one thousand seven hundred imprisoned representatives of the BDP, an inclusion of Öcalan in the “peace process” and the lowering of the 10 percent threshold to parliament.

The representatives of the Kurdish movement were not looking to the former Yugoslavia as an example to emulate, but to Spain or Great Britain. They sought not secession but devolution, in effect calling for the kind of regional autonomy that is enjoyed by the self-governing regions of Spain. By the summer of 2010, they had indeed become increasingly vocal in their demands for what was termed “democratic autonomy.” In July 2010 Osman Baydemir, the mayor of Diyarbakır, articulated a strikingly radical vision of a “multi-colored” Turkey: “In a Turkey that has been reorganized according to democratic autonomy, the Turkish Grand National Assembly will certainly remain in place. The national anthem shall continue to be sung. The Turkish flag will still fly. We have no quarrels with any of this. But every region will nevertheless have its own regional assembly. And one of these regional assemblies will be the Kurdistan regional assembly. And the colors of the Kurdish people, their ensign, will of course fly alongside the Turkish flag.” “What possible harm would it do if our yellow, red and green flag is displayed alongside our Turkish crescent and star outside our municipal building?” Baydemir asked.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, it did not require any stretch of the imagination to envision the consequences that a Turkish governing party would face, under present circumstances, if it were to accommodate such demands.

Indeed, the leader of the BDP bluntly told me that “the party that solves the Kurdish problem will not increase its votes.” Demirtaş was assuming – partly correctly, as it were – that accommodating the Kurdish movement would cost the AKP support among the Turks, while his own party would reap the benefits of the success of the Kurdish cause among the Kurds. As was noted above, the polls did indicate that the AKP had lost ground since the opening

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<sup>63</sup> “Baydemir’den Kürt bayrağı provokasyonu,” haber7.com, 1 August 2010.

had taken its unfortunate turn after the Habur entrance of the PKK militants, and the loss of support had in particular been sustained in the party's core base, among the Turkish conservatives in the Anatolian heartland. Yet the future of Kurdish politics after a resolution of the conflict could nevertheless scarcely be foretold at this premature stage. Indeed, Demirtaş himself predicted that the ideological differences between the Kurds were eventually destined to assert themselves, once what is today the overriding concern, the issue of securing the acceptance of Kurdishness, had been resolved. "Then we will possibly see the emergence of different Kurdish parties, aligned along leftist, liberal and conservative ideological preferences," he said. He described himself as left-leaning, unlike Baydemir, who had received a religious, madrasa education and who is more conservative.

Prominent liberal intellectual Etyen Mahçupyan, who is a supporter of the AKP, concurred that it was highly doubtful that the AKP stood to be electorally rewarded for its Kurdish opening.<sup>64</sup> Yet not solving the problem would incur an even greater cost for the AKP, warned Demirtaş. "In that case there will be fighting, and funerals (of fallen Turkish soldiers) will start to arrive," he direly predicted. Obviously, the leading representatives of the legal Kurdish movement were more careful in their public statements. In August 2010, the leader of the BDP struck a conciliatory note, calling for an end to violence. He chose to underline that Turks and Kurds alike desired that the fighting ceases.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, prominent Turks and Kurds shared a growing apprehension that what had hitherto remained unimaginable now seemed to loom dangerously: a full-blown civil war, and the eventual disintegration of the country. Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat, who is one of the most prominent Kurdish Members of Parliament within the AKP, and who has held the position of a vice chairman of the ruling party, were among those who issued dire warnings: "We have now reached such a point that Turkey has its back against the wall. We have already lost much, but we have now reached our limit (as a country). The things that we now risk losing are things that we cannot ever afford to lose, the unity of the country, brotherhood, its freedom. These are things that we

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<sup>64</sup> Etyen Mahçupyan, "Gorbaçov sendromu," *Taraf*, 6 November 2009.

<sup>65</sup> "Şiddet artık dursun," *Milliyet*, 12 August 2010.

cannot lose, but we are fast approaching that point. We are thus at the beginning of a very, very crucial crossing.”<sup>66</sup> Those words had been uttered shortly after the opening had been launched, when the initial expectations prompted by it were yet to be shattered. If they had rung apocalyptic then, they did so even more eerily a year later. The former president of the bar association of Diyarbakir and the president of the Human Rights foundation of Diyarbakir, Sezgin Tanrikulu, warned that a true calamity threatened, that the consequences of fighting would be much more severe this time around than what had ever been the case during the quarter century long war between the PKK and the Turkish state. He pointedly noted that there was now an extremely dangerous polarization among the youth on both sides.<sup>67</sup> Ümit Boyner of TÜSIAD made a similar assessment of the state of the country, saying that “it is our heartfelt worry that Turkey is increasingly coming apart along ethnic lines in our imagination, and that this state of mind is insidiously permeating the bloodlines of society.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, “we are no longer going to be insistent on living together,” stated one parliamentarian of the Kurdish BDP, Osman Özçelik.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the toll that the fighting had exacted (and where the Kurdish rebels sustained most of the losses) it has nonetheless been a longstanding assumption of the dominant Turkish narrative that inter-communal relations are basically unaffected. Until recently, complacency has prevailed in Turkish society, as the strength of the cords of society has more or less been taken for granted. In general, Turks have tended to seek comfort in the refrain “We Turks and Kurds are and have always been brethren, and we have never discriminated against the Kurds.” Nevertheless, it was becoming apparent that the cords of societal cohesion had gradually frayed. There was however still very little appreciation among the Turkish majority of the suffering that the Kurds had endured, and of the inequality to which their Kurdish “brethren” had been condemned. The Turkish narrative of the conflict did nothing to further empathy for the other. The Kurdish other, denoted as a despicable

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<sup>66</sup> Sevimay, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Devrim Sevimay, “Devlet çözüme daha yakın AKP ise çözüm sürecini tıkıyor,” *Milliyet*, 13 April 2010.

<sup>68</sup> “Açılım kötü yönetildi,” *Radikal*, 25 June 2010.

<sup>69</sup> “Birlikte yaşamak konusunda ısrarlı olmayacağız,” *Radikal*, 29 July 2010.



“terrorist” in the official discourse and in national media, had almost been deprived of its humanity in the eyes of the Turkish public. The representatives of the Kurdish movement, on the other hand, did not seem to appreciate that they needed to appeal to the understanding of the Turkish majority. They tended to frame their demands in categorical, unilateral terms, expressing a parochialism that failed to take the wider context of Turkey into proper consideration. However, it appeared to be an encouraging sign that the former leader of the now closed DTP, Ahmet Türk, and former DTP parliamentarian Aysel Tuğluk – who were deprived of their parliamentary seats and banned from politics by the Constitutional court in December 2009 – were elected co-chairs of the “Democratic society congress” in August 2010.

Türk and Tuğluk are moderates and usually non-provocative in their demeanor and could potentially play a constructive role in help forging a new understanding between Turks and Kurds. Their election was possibly an indication that the appreciation is growing within the Kurdish movement of the need to supply interlocutors who can have a wider appeal. Ahmet Türk is indeed respected as a sage politician. At an early stage, he advocated that the Kurdish movement lend support the AKP’s bid to amend the constitution, even though the proposed changes admittedly failed to address any of the grievances of the Kurds, a stance that Öcalan then highly disapproved of, in fact initially thwarting Türk’s attempt. Türk had predicted that the BDP was going to find it difficult to explain to its electorate why the party had come to align itself with the rejectionist axis of the Turkish nationalist parties the CHP and the MHP.

Meanwhile, several commentators called attention to a secessionist undercurrent that seemed to be gathering strength among the Turkish majority.<sup>70</sup> Ümit Pamir, a former high ranking diplomat who is presently a member of a NATO advisory group headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, stirred a major debate when he proposed that a referendum should be held in order to determine whether the Turks and the Kurds wanted a divorce. “The point that has to be clarified now is whether the Turks and the Kurds, who constitute the main elements of Turkey, have the determination

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<sup>70</sup> Sevımay, p. 224ff, 237ff.

to live together or if they want to secede from each other,” Pamir suggested.<sup>71</sup> Rather than acquiescing to the extension of any collective rights to the Kurds, many Turks did indeed appear to be tempted by divorce, which would entail giving up the Southeast to the Kurds, ensuring that Turkey, although reduced in territory, would remain a purely Turkish state, a Turkistan alongside Kurdistan. In this context, it was telling that former president and Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel saw fit to suggest that partition seldom came about as the result of the victory of the secessionist minority. Partition occurred, alleged Demirel, when the majority had had enough and rid itself of the troublesome minority, saying “they can get the hell out of here.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, Demirel had described not partition, but something infinitely more tragic. Whether or not intentionally, the remarks of Demirel evoked the tragedies in Anatolia during the past century, and conveyed the extent to which the current mood among an increasingly restive Turkish nationalist majority is troubling.

It is generally assumed that the principal reason why Turkish-Kurdish relations have still not broken down is that co-religiosity glues the nation together. Mustafa Erdoğan, a scholar of constitutional law and a leading liberal intellectual, pointed out that the AKP, although refraining from making any explicit references to religion, nevertheless expected co-religiosity to sustain its strategy of pulling the carpet from beneath the PKK. He suggested that the opening was an attempt to integrate the Kurds into the system, to secure the state by assimilating the Kurds into the AKP.<sup>73</sup> “We can tell that the AKP has put faith in the bond of shared religion,” said BDP leader Demirtaş. Yet he offered the prediction that those expectations and designs were destined to get foiled. He told this author that religion had, on the contrary, contributed to the evolution of the Kurdish national identity. The centers of religion in the Southeast, the madrasas, had served as depositors of Kurdishness, and had crucially dispensed education in Kurdish, he explained.

The opening could very well be described as an attempt to “fool” the Kurds, to entice them to embrace the AKP in the name of religious conservatism. It was certainly, as will be further elaborated, conceived as an endeavor to de-

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<sup>71</sup> Sevimay, p. 147ff.

<sup>72</sup> Fikret Bila, *Komutanlar cephesi*, Istanbul: Doğan kitap, 2010, p. 213.

<sup>73</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mustafa Erdoğan, “Amaç Kürtleri AKP’lileştirmek,” *Taraf*, 1 February 2010.

fuse their nationalism and thus to shore up the state. Yet the opening is equally an expression of the implicit recognition that the state has to accommodate societal diversity, and carries not only statist but undeniably liberal connotations as well, even though liberalism is far from being comprehensively assumed by the AKP. It was precisely because it did not fit neatly into any known narrative that the opening appeared amorphous during its first phase, and was lambasted for conflicting reasons. While Kurds and some liberals saw through what they held to be the liberal “pretenses” of the opening, and thus hastened to write it off as an enterprise of political trickery, Turkish nationalists had with alarm taken notice that the state was recoiling from what it had historically been engaged in, demanding the submission of the Kurds. Where some saw an attempt to secure the state, others saw an abdication of state power. In fact, both sides had gotten it right. I asked İhsan Arslan, an influential Kurdish AKP parliamentarian, if the opening was indeed about promoting freedom or about securing the stability of the state: “It is about both,” he replied.

Indeed, the opening is ultimately an endeavor to reconcile statism and freedom; as such, it mirrors the ambiguities and contradictions that define present-day Turkey. In a sense, these ambiguities and contradictions have found their ultimate expression in the ruling AKP. The AKP straddles statism and – to a certain extent – freedom: its ascendancy represents the political outcome of a socioeconomic revolution that has empowered society and undermined the foundations of state omnipotence. Yet while it owes its rise to power to being the representative of a part of the former periphery, the rural Sunni conservatives, the AKP is by now well settled into the center, and has to all intents and purposes established itself as the party of the state. That has stoked the fears that the AKP will be tempted to fit into the attires of traditional state authoritarianism. The leader of the Kurdish party BDP pointed out that “even if the ideologies change, a change of the status quo may not necessarily follow suit.”<sup>74</sup> Demirtaş claimed that the AKP was engaged not in a struggle for democracy, but one for power, predicting that the AKP was set to “be the state” once victory over the old state establishment had been secured. Yet even if that were indeed to ensue, it nevertheless has to be taken

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<sup>74</sup> Devrim Sevimay, “Biz AKP’yi yaşatma derneği değiliz,” *Milliyet*, 12 April 2010.

into account that the state itself is subject to change. It has been dawning upon the Turkish state, inhabited since time immemorial by authoritarian reflexes, that a liberal order is imposing itself. Indeed, the classical dichotomy of statism and freedom may have had its day in Turkey. As will soon be developed further, there is a growing appreciation in the state establishment that the security and survival of the state requires that the societal yearning for freedom be accommodated, a recognition that it is the insistence on suppressing society that threatens the integrity of the state.

In fact, the leader of the BDP recognizes that the state has changed: “The state as a whole is actually more inclined toward a solution, but it is the timorous stance of the AKP that obstructs the process.”<sup>75</sup> The leader of the Kurdish party was implying that the state apparatus is less prejudiced against the Kurdish movement than the AKP; indeed, the AKP and the BDP are rivals in the Kurdish areas. Yet it is evidently in the interest of the state to promote the AKP as an alternative to the BDP.

Nonetheless, the intellectual “revolution” that has taken place within “the mind of the state” (“*devlet aklı*” as it is referred to in Turkish) represents the other, less noticed but not least decisive change that has occurred in Turkey during the last decade. Absent that reconsideration, the opening would in fact have been inconceivable. Yet the significance of the intellectual evolution of the state apparatus has not been properly appreciated. There is a tendency among observers of Turkey to ascribe the opening more or less exclusively to the reformism of the AKP. However, it is the confluence of socioeconomic change – that underpins the power of the AKP – and intellectual change – among the “guardians” of the state – that has set the stage for the Kurdish opening. In an even more fundamental sense, the opening evokes history; it represents the prelude to what may prove to be the final phase of the bi-centennial quest of the Turkish state for secure societal foundations.

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<sup>75</sup> Devrim Sevimay, “Devlet çözüme daha yakın AKP ise çözüm sürecini tıkıyor,” *Milliyet*, 13 April 2010.

## Saving the State

Since it came to power in 2002, the AKP has been engaged in a protracted battle with elements of the old state establishment. The ascension of a party that had sprung from within the Islamist movement represented a most profound challenge to the ingrained habits of thought and perceptions of the republican elite. Many within the old guard of the state, and their supporters in society, had, and indeed still have, difficulty coping with the specter of former outsiders – the Sunni conservatives – moving in and gradually taking charge of the state apparatus. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu expressed that frustration when he lamented that “the government (of the AKP) has begun to conquer the state.”<sup>76</sup> After all, it is not an uncommon occurrence in history that entrenched elites, faced with the rise of new elites, refuse to yield power, protect their turf from intrusion and defend their prerogatives. Neither is it uncommon that ostensibly high-minded ideological considerations supply a convenient excuse for what is in fact motivated by pure self-interest. Yet ideology, or more precisely cultural identity, was nevertheless of consequence in the context of the Turkish power struggle. The fact that the opposition to the AKP has come to be framed in terms that evoke an internal “clash of civilizations” did mirror the cultural and sociological particularities of Turkey.

The ascension of the AKP essentially represented the political outcome of the rise of a new middle class in Turkey’s conservative heartland. Since the 1980s, once rural and backward Anatolia has been transformed, becoming a hub of economic vitality. The liberalization of the economy has turned the pious Anatolian peasant into an entrepreneur who embraces globalization; and as he traded with the rest of the world, he could no longer be held at bay by the gatekeepers of state power. The republican elite – and its support base in society, the “westernized” secularists – were accustomed to think of the culturally conservative Anatolian peasantry as uncouth and unfit to rule the state. This

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<sup>76</sup> Oral Çalışlar, “Fethullahçılık tehlikesi” ve hukuk,” *Radikal*, 29 August 2010.

social and cultural estrangement from the popular masses assured that the ascension of the AKP was ascribed near-existential overtones in the secularist narrative.

However, the AKP challenged not only entrenched power, not only cultural and ideological preconceptions; it was above all vulnerable to accusations that it represented a threat to the state itself. As the above-cited words of the CHP leader suggest, those who were brought to political power by society were not supposed to interfere with the state. Yet the Sunni conservatives, a force of the periphery, defied and ultimately succeeded in “conquering” the state. That was truly a revolution that upset age old state-society relations in the Turkish realm. It had never before occurred in republican Turkish history – or before, for that matter – that the state had had to yield to a societal force, be it Sunni conservatives, the left or the Kurds. The state had managed to retain its elevated autonomy and had kept society cowed, until now, when economic liberalization had finally begun to unravel the foundations of its omnipotence. Yet this upheaval notwithstanding, the AKP nevertheless needed to prove its statist credentials; it was compelled to reassure that it could be trusted as the new custodian of the state. The governing party was anxious to earn the trust of those within the state establishment who remained uneasy over what represented an unprecedented affirmation of societal autonomy. It also had to reassure a public for whom the state remained sacrosanct. Indeed, the Sunni conservative base of the AKP itself embraced the state as a supreme value.

Undoubtedly, the AKP government had taken a significant risk when it assumed responsibility for the Kurdish opening, inviting as it did the accusations of the Turkish nationalists that its policies undermined the integrity, even endangered the very existence, of the state. Tellingly, the representatives of the AKP were at great pains to reassure that the opening was indeed a state project. They repeatedly assured that it was being carried out in conjunction with the entire state establishment. “The security establishment has taken care to ensure that the task of the government is facilitated,” a senior AKP parliamentarian told me. “MIT (The National Intelligence Agency) and the military agreed that something had to be done in order to solve the problem,” he related. Arslan, another senior AKP figure, confirmed this version, telling me that the state institutions had indeed lent support to the endeavor of the

AKP government. However, Arslan, a Kurdish parliamentarian from Diyarbakır and an Islamist who did not hide his hostility to the Kemalist republic,<sup>77</sup> did not harbor any illusions about the compact between the state and the AKP; he was confident that the support of the state was motivated by purely ulterior considerations: “The state gave us support with the expectation that we were going to fail. They thought “let them by all means have a try at it, so that they can stumble.” Indeed, a former deputy director of the National Intelligence Agency observed that the divergence of views between the military and the civilians had rendered it difficult to concretize the contents of the Kurdish opening.<sup>78</sup> And in fact, the civilian camp includes not only the government, but the intelligence bureaucracy as well. Several statements of retired directors of the MİT attest that the civilian branch of the state security establishment is decidedly more “post-national” in its approach to the Kurdish issue than the General staff.

Interior minister Atalay underlined that “we attach great importance to carry through the measures as a state policy.”<sup>79</sup> He impressed that he was “happy to say that there is a great consensus about the solution among every level and institution of the state.”<sup>80</sup> Fatma Şahin, a deputy chairperson of the AKP, repeated the same line, describing the opening as a “state project,” and calling my attention to the statement that was issued by the National Security Council (MGK) in August 2010, shortly after the opening had been announced. The council, chaired by the president, is the venue where the military high command has traditionally issued its “recommendations” to the civilian leadership; although the council has become more civilian, with a civilian secretary-general, and although the power of the generals has been decisively curbed, their acquiescence to the opening was nevertheless deemed crucial. The National Security Council informed the public that the Interior ministry had supplied information about the measures that were being planned in order to ensure the unity of the state, and it was underlined that these measures had

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<sup>77</sup> “The state was built on unhealthy foundations,” he told me. He looked forward to the day when the religious conservatism of society would fulfill its true potential: “It is the conservatives who have the real potential; they are indeed patient, but once they assert themselves, there is no telling where that will end.”

<sup>78</sup> “Eski MİT yöneticisi Apo’yla görüşmeleri anlattı,” *Taraf*, 25 August 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Sevimay, p. 293

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298

been subject to previous deliberations in the council. The statement concluded with the crucial sentence that it had been recommended that the efforts of the Interior ministry were carried on.<sup>81</sup> The generals had issued what apparently was an unambiguous endorsement of the opening, which drew the ire of the nationalist CHP and MHP opposition parties that fulminated against the military, revealing an unprecedented rift between them and the General staff.

The Kemalist CHP found it conspicuous that the very first gathering of the opening – a workshop with the participation of Interior minister Atalay and representatives of pro-government media outlets – had taken place at the Police Academy. According to the CHP, this fact underlined that the AKP was anxious to present the opening not as its own initiative, but as a state project. However, the Police Academy, although undeniably a state institution, was nevertheless a particularly suspicious venue: “The public has got the impression that this Academy is a place where opinions close to those of the government are elaborated, and that it is inspired by circles abroad that lend support to the government, and where efforts to influence the public opinion in this vein are being concentrated,” argued the CHP.<sup>82</sup> The “circles abroad that lend support to the government” was a thinly veiled allusion to the Muslim brotherhood of the preacher Fethullah Gülen, who resides in the U.S. The Gülen brotherhood – or simply the “cemaat,” “the community,” as it is commonly referred to in Turkey – exerts considerable influence in Turkish society through its web of media outlets and schools. The secularist-nationalists believe that the ‘cemaat’ harbor insidious designs to usher in a religious state, and they have come to regard the police as being under the control of the Gülen brotherhood.<sup>83</sup>

The Police Academy is indeed a venue where the preparations for the opening have been conducted. İhsan Bal of the Academy related that these preparations were initiated three years ago, and had since involved discussions with

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<sup>81</sup> Milli Güvenlik Kurulu, “Basın Bildirisi,” 20 August 2009, <http://www.mgk.gov.tr/Turkce/basinbildiriz2009/20agustos2009.html>

<sup>82</sup> CHP, “AKP’nin Açılım fiyaskosu,” p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> In a controversial bestselling book that was published in August 2010, the chief of police in the province of Eskisehir, Hanefi Avcı, alleged that the Gülen brotherhood controlled the police, and that it was deeply organized within the military, the judiciary and the state bureaucracy as well, and that “the brotherhood” posed a grave threat to the state and to personal freedoms. Avcı was arrested in September 2010.



the governors in the Southeast and with other state authorities in the region, as well as with representatives of the security bureaucracy regarding a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the perceptions of the Turkish state security establishment have evolved significantly during the last several years. By and large, the state security establishment has ceased to view the Kurdish issue as a “terrorism” problem, although the public discourse, not least the language employed by the media, still privileges such a demagogic and politically convenient interpretation of the problem. While leading politicians, the military in its official statements, and the journalists of the national media continued to refer to Abdullah Öcalan as the “head-separatist” (“*bölücübaş*”) and to the PKK simply as the “terrorist organization,” the decision-makers of the state had begun to take a much more cool-headed, detached view. The words of General Işık Koşaner, who became chief of the General staff in August 2010, pronounced off-the record in 2006 (and later disclosed to have been his words), when he was deputy chief of the General staff, spoke of the evolution of the “mind of the state”: “Call it the Kurdish problem or whatever else you wish, the truth of the matter is that this has ceased to be a terrorism problem. The problem is about Kurdish separatism; it has thus become a political problem.”<sup>85</sup> Former chief of the General staff General Hilmi Özkök had been similarly blunt: “You cannot solve the problem if you keep hitting your head on the same spot.” Özkök had stated that “it is impossible to produce a solution if you try to enforce the same military solution over and over again.”<sup>86</sup>

In 2006, General Koşaner despondently foresaw what was to be openly demanded by the Kurdish movement four years later: “Tomorrow they are going to raise the Kurdish flag next to, perhaps instead of, the Turkish flag outside the municipalities, and nobody will be able to object. It is not that these issues are not being discussed in the National Security Council or in other legal venues; they are. The problem is that we are late at taking appropriate, political measures. It is not enough that the measures are confined to battling terrorism. There is a need for a political struggle, and that requires

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<sup>84</sup> Neşe Düzel, İhsan Bal: “İspanya’daki “kısmi af” gelebilir,” *Taraf*, 14 November 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Murat Yetkin, “Koşaner ne dediyse o oldu,” *Radikal*, 7 August 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Neşe Düzel, İhsan Bal: “İspanya’daki “kısmi af” gelebilir.”

that a policy is outlined. That is where we are running late,” the general lamented.<sup>87</sup>

Yet speaking as he took up the office as chief of the General staff in August 2010, General Koşaner offered little hint that the military’s view of the Kurdish issue had evolved. Indeed, one commentator found it inauspicious that the word “Kurd” was conspicuously missing from the speech, while the general had made the usual reference to the “special conditions” of Turkey – namely its particularly troubled neighborhood – that have traditionally justified opposition to the full democratization of the country.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, not even the most “liberal” among generals seem capable of imagining a Turkey from which the straightjacket of Turkish nationalism has been removed. Hilmi Özkök is hailed – as well as assailed – as the most democratic-minded chief of the General staff that Turkey has ever had; his opposition to the much-reported schemes within the military to overthrow the AKP government earned him the scorn of secularist nationalists. Yet Özkök nevertheless comes across as a strikingly unreformed Turkish nationalist of the old school. “Kurdish education can never be accepted,” he says. “That would harm our national cohesiveness,” he claimed, adding that “Kurdish is not a sufficient language to be used in education.”<sup>89</sup>

Instead, the most striking examples of the evolution of the “mind of the state” have been supplied by a string of former directors of the National Intelligence Agency. The role of the MİT is somewhat reminiscent of the crucial role that was played by the Soviet intelligence agency KGB in the 1980s; the urgency of change in order to save the communist system from economic collapse had first been recognized by the intelligence agency. Glasnost and perestroika were, if not commissioned by the KGB, precipitated by the assessments of the KGB. It seems justified to posit a similar impact of the Turkish intelligence agency on the turnaround effectuated by the Turkish state. The nationalist intransigence with which the MİT had been identified in the past has given way to a remarkably detached and non-nationalist appreciation of the adjustments that impose themselves on the state. A senior Turkish dip-

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<sup>87</sup> Murat Yetkin, “Koşaner ne dediyse o oldu,” *Radikal*, 7 August 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Hasan Cemal, “Basbuğ ve Koşaner’in konuşmalarından 15 nokta,” *Milliyet*, 29 August 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Bila, p. 175.

lomat recalled how he and his colleagues had been given a crash course by the MİT on the Kurdish problem in the beginning of the 1980s. In preparation for the questions that the diplomats were going to be required to answer in their postings, officials of the MİT had instructed them that there were no Kurdish people or any Kurdish language, ludicrously telling the young diplomats that the so-called Kurds were in fact Turkish nomads whose feet made the sounds “kart, kurt” as they wandered in the mountains, from which the word Kurd was supposedly derived.<sup>90</sup> Kenan Evren, the general who had taken power in 1980 and subsequently had himself elected president, was peddling the same absurdity about the Kurds in public rallies.<sup>91</sup> Less than three decades later, the National Intelligence Agency had become the very embodiment of the departure of the Turkish state from such preposterous irrationality.

The Turkish public had been stunned by the unorthodox statements of Cevat Öneş, a retired deputy director of the MİT, in a television interview in 2007. “The policies that Turkey has pursued since 1938 have deepened the divisions (in society),” stated Öneş.<sup>92</sup> The former MİT official held that Turkey needed to cease to perpetually fear partition; the state and the Turkish public had for ever been haunted by the fear that conceding to the Kurdish demands would inevitably spell the end of Turkey in its present shape. Cevat Öneş went as far as suggesting that Turkey should envision purging the constitution from its Turkish nationalist statutes. “Why should we not rewrite the constitution as to underscore our Anatolian richness (of cultural diversity)?” he inquired.<sup>93</sup> “The Article 66 of the constitution, which stipulates that everyone that is bound to the state by the bond of citizenship is to be considered a Turk could be rewritten, and replaced by a wording that does not carry ethnic connotations, privileging a constitutional citizenship. The introduction of the constitution could refer to the heritage of Anatolia, describing how the War of Independence (1919-1922) was fought together by different ethnic groups. It could define the nation in a way that makes place for its diverse, rich heritage in-

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<sup>90</sup> Murat Yetkin, “Kart kurttan PKK’yla görüşmeye,” *Radikal*, 21 August 2010.

<sup>91</sup> The military regime in the early 1980s was responsible for massive human rights abuses. The prison in Diyarbakır became notorious for the torture to which Kurds were subjected. Today, it is widely acknowledged in Turkey that the abuses of the military junta were a major factor that contributed to the subsequent rise of the PKK.

<sup>92</sup> Sevımay, p. 96.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

stead of the [current] monolithic definition of the nation,” he prescribed.<sup>94</sup> Although he did not venture as far as to propose that Atatürk’s motto “Happy is who calls himself a Turk” be discarded altogether, his suggestions that it be supplemented with the alternatives “I am happy to be a citizen of Turkey” and “I am happy to be a patriot of Turkey”<sup>95</sup> nonetheless amounted to effectively circumscribing and neutralizing Kemalist nationalism.

In a recent interview, Öneş reiterated that Turkishness should be removed from the constitution, describing it as a dated concept, a product of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “The definition that conforms to the requirements of the 21<sup>th</sup> century is spelled citizenship of the republic of Turkey. There is no need to refer to Turkishness in the constitution, since it is a notion that is understood to have ethnic connotations.”<sup>96</sup> Öneş exhorted the nationalist CHP and MHP to abandon the nationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and adapt their ideologies to the new age. “They need to redefine nationalism in accordance with the current realities of the world. Borders still exist, but they are transcended; in the areas of law, politics, culture and economy, integration is transcending national borders. This global process cannot be resisted. National interests are preserved, not by obstructing this process, but by adapting to it.”<sup>97</sup>

A few weeks before Öneş made his groundbreaking proposals, the director of MIT, Emre Taner, had essentially exhorted Turkey to reconsider its Kurdish policies, observing that the geopolitics of the Middle East denied the country the luxury of relying on defensive measures, noting that Turkey had to be proactive.<sup>98</sup> It seemed probable that Öneş had in fact pronounced what the acting director obviously could not be explicit about. The statements of these current and former MIT directors were indeed interpreted as being complementary, and were hailed as encouraging signs by the Kurdish movement. “As we understand it, Taner is warning the state that Turkey has to formulate a new Kurdish policy in the wider context of the Middle East,” stated one

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>96</sup> Neşe Düzel, Cevat Öneş: “Açılımı bitiren siyasetçi seçilemez,” *Taraf*, 21 June 2010.

<sup>97</sup> Neşe Düzel, Cevat Öneş: “Hakkari Filistin sokakları gibiydi,” *Taraf*, 22 June 2010.

<sup>98</sup> Sevimay, p. 95f.

Kurdish politician.<sup>99</sup> MİT appeared to be institution that had the best grasp of the Kurdish problem in Turkey.<sup>100</sup>

Mehmet Eymür, another former MİT director to come forward with suggestions that broke ranks with Turkish state orthodoxy, was not as liberal as Öneş in his political prescriptions. Somewhat disingenuously he claimed that “there is no Kurdish problem, there is a PKK problem.”<sup>101</sup> Eymür, a former counterterrorism director of MİT, did not consider it necessary to acknowledge the Kurdish identity in any constitutional terms.<sup>102</sup> However, like Öneş, Eymür prescribed negotiations with the PKK, including, if necessary, with its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan. Referring to IRA and ETA as examples, Öneş held it to be normal that Öcalan’s contributions be sought.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, he underlined that the dialogue between the state agencies and the PKK leader had entered a new phase since 2008: “The process of dialogue since 2008 coincides with the state’s growing maturity and with the Turkish armed forces’ appreciation that a non-violent solution has to be arrived at.”<sup>104</sup> The kind of evolution to which the former deputy director of MİT referred was evident in the case of MİT’s former counterterrorism director. Eymür’s prescription of outright negotiations with Öcalan spoke of a spectacular personal change of heart and of a striking professional reevaluation. Eymür was none other than the instigator of the MİT’s failed attempt to assassinate Öcalan in Damascus in 1996.<sup>105</sup> Thirteen years later, he had reached the point where he recommended that Öcalan be compensated with a reduction of his sentence “in proportion to the contributions he makes to ensuring societal peace.”<sup>106</sup> He further advocated that the conditions of an amnesty should be generous and that the leadership of the PKK should benefit from it as well.<sup>107</sup> The former counterterrorism director professed that he in principle, and against the backdrop of the psychology of the Turkish public opinion, would have preferred other

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 97f.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>103</sup> “Eski MİT yöneticisi Apo’yla görüşmeleri anlattı,” *Taraf*, 25 August 2010.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Sevimay, p. 90, 94.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

interlocutors for the peace talks, but if it turned out that Öcalan could not be circumvented, he nevertheless had no qualms with him being seated at the negotiating table. However, in that case, he impressed, it was paramount that care was taken to prepare the public, and in particular that the approval of the relatives of the “martyred” Turkish soldiers was duly secured.

Sönmez Köksal, the director of the MİT from 1992 to 1998, took an even more unorthodox view of the leader of the PKK. “It is certain that Öcalan will play a decisive role in determining the successful conclusion of the process.”<sup>108</sup> Yet Köksal expressed the concern – which is certainly not unfounded – that Öcalan’s premature, direct inclusion in the process would only result in torpedoing the peace efforts from the very start.<sup>109</sup> He thus prescribed that the process be conducted in secret for the time being. In the meantime it was essential that the public be prepared. Köksal underlined that societal concord would require that “extreme nationalism” and “ethnic nationalism” be kept under control. He called for efforts to persuade the public, for displays of empathy and exhorted the politicians to desist from short-sighted populism.<sup>110</sup> In fact, the former director of the MİT was making the case that the state needs to defuse Turkish as well as Kurdish nationalism. His words were suggestive of a notable equidistance of the “mind of the state” to nationalism, whether Kurdish or Turkish. “Extreme nationalism” (“*ulusalcılık*” in Turkish political parlance) was a reference to the radical Turkish neo-nationalism that has made a lot of noise in the Turkish debate during the last decade, while “ethnic nationalism” was the usual catch-word in the Turkish discourse for Kurdish nationalism. Taken together, the statements of the former directors of the MİT impressed that state rationality had evolved toward the point of considering nationalist orthodoxy to be disruptive of the designs and considerations of the state. In fact, such seemingly unexpected pragmatism was not incongruent with Turkish state tradition; the paramount concern of the state had always been survival and security, not ideological purity, a point that will soon be further developed.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

### “We are Trembling with Fear”

At the height of the PKK attacks on Turkish army outposts in the summer of 2010, the then chief of the General staff General İlker Başbuğ made a startling confession. Relating that he anxiously awaited news to arrive from the South-east until late night, General Başbuğ confessed “I cannot sleep at night.”<sup>111</sup> The Chief of the General staff remained stubbornly defiant in the face of the Kurdish insurgency, vowing that Turkey would ultimately prevail. Yet, his admission divulged that he was, indeed like everyone else in the state leadership, deeply concerned and even shaken by the staying power of the PKK. Indeed, it was the very existence of a Kurdish people in the country that seemed nightmarish to some generals. The words of retired general Nejati Özgen similarly spoke of a growing desperation. The general, who had fought the PKK in the 1990s, regretted that some Kurdish families had up to thirty children, and direly predicted that the Kurds were set to become the majority in the country: “I don’t know whether this is going to occur by 2030 or by 2040, but things are nonetheless headed in that direction. They [the Kurds] make children, not out of ignorance, but deliberately, because the head terrorist [Abdullah Öcalan] tells them to do so. When I was army commander in Erzurum I asked the Erzurum Atatürk University to conduct a study, and they concluded that the Kurdish population was going to exceed the Turkish population. I am not an individual who is usually given to pessimism, but I have a feeling that this is something we will not be able to overcome.”<sup>112</sup>

Former chief of the General staff İlker Başbuğ in July 2010 found solace in enumerating how many PKK militants that the Turkish army had disposed of; to him, that proved the point that Turkey was in fact waging what was supposedly and despite all appearances a successful war against the Kurdish insurgents. “In mathematical terms, our security forces have in fact rooted out the PKK five times over during the last twenty-six years,” Başbuğ stated.<sup>113</sup> However, such body-counting, besides being unsavory, inadvertently only served to underline the very tenacity of the PKK, which although it had continuously sustained heavy losses, nevertheless somehow always managed to bounce back. General Başbuğ attributed this staying power to sheer “luck,”

<sup>111</sup> Selahattin Önkibar, “Orgeneral Başbuğ: Uykularım kaçıyor,” *Yeni Çağ*, 2 July 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Bila, p. 78.

<sup>113</sup> “İlker Basbuğ’dan Uğur Dündar’a çarpıcı açıklamalar,” [nationalturk.com](http://nationalturk.com), 6 July 2010.

maintaining that geopolitical fortune had recurrently intervened, always rescuing the PKK, just as the organization was on the verge of disintegrating. And it was northern Iraq that continued to give the PKK its lease on life. General Başbuğ lamented the lack of state authority in northern Iraq since the end of the 1980s, and called upon the central government in Baghdad and the regional authorities in northern Iraq to assume their responsibilities. He suggested that their continued negligence to take action against the “terrorists” would prompt Turkey to take unilateral action, something Turkey had done regularly since the 1990s. Başbuğ concluded by remarking that the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq could not but adversely affect Turkish-Iraqi as well as notably Turkish-American relations.<sup>114</sup>

The bellicose statements of the outgoing chief of the General staff provoked a reaction by President Abdullah Gül. The president called the general to order, deeming it inappropriate that he had spoken about matters that were to be decided by the government, and stating that “talkativeness may have as consequence that certain things which were going to happen are obstructed.”<sup>115</sup> The presidential statement suggested that the military option was indeed being seriously considered at that juncture. Yet in spite of their defiant bellicosity, the words of General Başbuğ above all spoke of the bewilderment, even desperation, of the Turkish High command. As the statements of his successor General Işık Koşaner and predecessor Hilmi Özkök cited above testified, the Turkish military itself had come to appreciate that there was no military solution to the conflict.

The establishment of a *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which supplied a safe haven for the PKK, had nevertheless put Turkey in a quandary. The former counter-terrorism director of the MİT, Mehmet Eymür, reminded that “cordial, good and reciprocal relations with the Iraqi Kurds” were crucial if Turkey was going to succeed in enticing the PKK to give up its “terrorist activities.”<sup>116</sup> Military incursions into northern Iraq were certainly not going to enhance good, neighborly relations with the Iraqi Kurds. Indeed, Turkey’s Kurdish problem and the fate of northern Iraq were inextricably linked; what

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> “Cumhurbaşkanı Gül Başbuğ’u uyardı,” haber7.com, 8 July 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Sevimay, p. 91.



happened in northern Iraq had an inevitable impact on Turkey and its Kurdish population, while Turkey cast its shadow over Iraq's Kurdish region. Northern Iraq represented a challenge, as well as – perhaps – a strategic opportunity for Turkey. It could either help tear Turkey apart, or contribute to bolstering Turkey's regional power aspirations. And from the perspective of the U.S., it was of paramount importance that Turkey put itself in a position that enabled it to contribute to the stability and integrity of Iraq. With the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the question of the possible extension of a Turkish protective umbrella over northern Iraq had gained a new acuity. Indeed, there were those who considered that the Kurdish opening of Turkey had essentially been prompted by such geopolitical considerations and alliance requirements,<sup>117</sup> as the necessity of developing cordial relations with the Iraqi Kurds within the framework of U.S. strategy made it imperative that Turkey put its own Kurdish house in order. However, the Turkish-Iraqi border that had been established by the treaty of Lausanne in 1923 was cause for concern from the perspective of Ankara.

Former president Süleyman Demirel related to writer Fikret Bila a conversation between the founding president of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, and his lieutenant İsmet İnönü, after the Turkish delegation to the Lausanne peace conference in 1923 had been forced to back down from its demand that the former Ottoman province of Mosul be ceded to the new republic of Turkey by the British occupants of what was going to become modern day Iraq.<sup>118</sup> The British had refused to yield, and the issue was definitely settled in 1926. A few years before he was elected president, Abdullah Gül had said that “the biggest mistake Atatürk made was to give away the oil-rich north of Iraq to the British.”<sup>119</sup> Atatürk and İnönü agreed that the loss of Mosul would haunt Turkey in the future. Demirel recalled that the two founding leaders had had the foresight to anticipate that the failure to include Mosul and Kirkuk within the borders of Turkey was certain to cause the most severe problems in the future; with one part of the Kurdish population in the north and the other in the south, Turkey's integrity was inevitably going to be imperiled. Atatürk's solution was to gather the Kurds in their entirety within Turkey's borders, so as to

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<sup>117</sup> Kadri Gürsel, “ABD'yle sermayesiz ortaklık modeli,” *Milliyet*, 21 June 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Bila, p. 221f.

<sup>119</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, New York: Random House, 2000, p. 120.

be able to control them effectively. Demirel deplored that Turkey had refused to allow U.S. troops access to Turkish territory in the 2003 Iraqi invasion, depriving itself of the opportunity to establish a military presence in northern Iraq.<sup>120</sup> Demirel acknowledged that it is assuredly difficult to know for sure whether the ensuing results of a Turkish intrusion would have been good or bad, but he nevertheless held that Turkey anyhow should have entered Iraq.<sup>121</sup> “If Turkey had entered there, an independent, autonomous administration could not have been established in northern Iraq. That administration would not have been an American protectorate. On the contrary, it would have been under the protection of Turkey. Then, we would not have been worrying as we are today what the effects would be for Turkey if an independent Kurdish state was to be proclaimed (in northern Iraq), because nothing of the kind could then have occurred. Of course, there were risks (with an intervention), but those risks should nevertheless have been assumed. Today, we are trembling in fear because we didn’t take that risk.”<sup>122</sup>

The Kurds in the Southeast of Turkey could very well be attracted to look toward the south, warned Demirel. Asked whether he thought that there was a risk that northern Iraq under the Barzani leadership could become a point of attraction in terms identity for Turkey’s Kurds, Demirel replied in the affirmative, although he did not want to exaggerate the extent of the risk.<sup>123</sup> Yet such apprehension was not unfounded. The Kurdish population in the Southeast of Turkey has by all accounts become increasingly estranged from the rest of the country. Even though there have been no surveys to date of the Kurdish opinion that have given reason to conclude that there is a strong secessionist sentiment among Turkey’s Kurds, it is nevertheless apparent that the counterinsurgency tactics of the Turkish state have exacted a heavy toll on the commitment and loyalty to Turkey in the Southeast. That in particular holds true with regard to the young generation, those who came of age during the 1990s, when the war against the PKK ravaged the region. “The youth, the generation of the 90s, do not consider themselves as belonging to this country,” testified Mehmet Kaya, a prominent Kurdish businessman and

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<sup>120</sup> Bila, p. 222.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

former chairman of the Diyarbakır business association.<sup>124</sup> He described how the children of those who were evicted from their villages by the security forces in the 1990s have developed a deeply felt revulsion toward the state. The incarceration of thousands of adolescents, and the social and economic deprivation that reigns in cities like overcrowded Diyarbakır further contributes to aggravating the estrangement of the Kurdish youth in the Southeast from Turkey.

The fear that the Kurdish part of the country might gravitate toward the *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq makes it tempting for the Turkish state to consider an integration of Turkey and northern Iraq. In fact, that was what former president Turgut Özal had appeared to have in mind at the beginning of the 1990s. Özal had vaguely hinted at a federative solution, suggesting an economic integration of Turkey and northern Iraq.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, to a large extent, that is something that has come about since. To some, it did not seem far-fetched to imagine a next, political step. Ümit Pamir, a former high ranking diplomat and former foreign policy advisor to Prime Ministers Mesut Yılmaz and Bülent Ecevit, proposed what in fact amounted to an abrogation of the Lausanne treaty. Addressing Atatürk's nightmare about the Kurds, he observed that the division of the Kurds inevitably caused Turkey to fear secession: "The Kurd here looks there, and the Kurd there looks here. This naturally gives rise to the suspicion in Turkey "are they going to unite"?"<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, an economic integration that included northern Iraq – Özal's formula – in the sphere of a greater Turkey by implication held forth the promise of mitigating those fears. Indeed, a merger of Turkish and Iraqi Kurds under Turkey's auspices, enshrining, as it were, the notion of "one state-two nations," would arguably remove the principal objection to accommodating the Kurds' identity demands, that Turkish compliance would only embolden the Kurds in their supposed quest for independence. Even absent a realization of Turgut Özal's bold vision, it could be plausibly imagined that the *de facto* establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq will eventually make it less, and not necessarily more difficult to reconsider Turkish concep-

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<sup>124</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mehmet Kaya, "Türkler, bir gece düşünsünler," *Taraf*, 22 March 2010.

<sup>125</sup> Sevimay, p. 152.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

tions of the Kurds; it may indeed serve to promote the notion of Turkish-Kurdish equality.

Ahmet İnsel, a leftist academic who is one of Turkey's prominent intellectuals, ventured that the developments in northern Iraq were of crucial significance, since they had effectively impressed on everyone that "whether we like or not, we are going to live side by side with a Kurdish political entity."<sup>127</sup> In this view, the admittedly grudging but nevertheless pragmatic recognition of the existence of a Kurdistan in Iraq ultimately carried implications for how the Turkish state was going to relate to its own, Kurdish citizens as well. In a departure from its past practices, Turkey has diplomatically embraced the Kurdistan Regional Government, although the official designation of the KRG is still avoided by the Turkish state. Perhaps it was not to be precluded that the experience of sharing a border with a *de facto* Kurdish state would eventually help promote a new notion of Turkey itself: as a state defined by the concept of equality, instead of one identified with a supposedly monolithic nation. Indeed, it was in that direction that the stance taken by the supervisors of state security, cited above, unequivocally pointed. After all, contrary to what other appearances may lead to surmise, a closer inspection of the historical record reveals that the Turkish "mind of the state" has in fact never let ideological purity rule supreme.

### **From the Turkish-Pagan Synthesis to a Turkish-Kurdish Condominium?**

Turkey has appeared to be a singularly dogmatic, ideological state, unflinchingly committed to the template bequeathed by its founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Indeed, the Turkish constitution solemnly lays down that the state – and by implication its citizenry – is bound to adhere to "Atatürkist nationalism." Yet means should not be conflated with aims. Nationalism has been harnessed to serve the interests of state power. It has been useful, and glorified, insofar as it has helped safeguard and legitimize the state, valued by the holders of state power as it promised to supply a stable, societal base for a state in perpetual quest for security. However, when circumstances have so required, the custodians of the Turkish state have not shied from recasting or

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<sup>127</sup> Neşe Düzel, Ahmet İnsel, "Türkler Kürtlerle eşitliği kabul etmiyor," *Taraf*, 3 August 2009.

exchanging its ideological template. In that respect, the republican experience did not represent any rupture with historical continuity.

The words of Nevzat Tandoğan, who was the governor of Ankara in the 1930s and 1940s, are often cited as expression of how the Turkish state elite has understood the relationship between the state and the citizenry, but they equally speak of its unsentimental pragmatism with regard to ideologies: Haranguing an arrested, dissident journalist who had been brought before him, the governor reportedly exclaimed “you stupid Anatolian, what is it to you getting mixed up with nationalism and communism? You have two duties, first, to till the earth and secondly, to show up when you are called up to the army. If nationalism is necessary, we will peddle it. If communism is required, then we will indeed make sure that it is introduced.”<sup>128</sup>

As Turkish historian Taner Akçam observes referring to the late Ottoman leadership, “the ruling elite recognized no principle other than the preservation of the centuries-old state and the need to continue its existence at any price. Thus, for the Ottoman leaders, ideologies could be discarded and exchanged like clothing when the situation called for it.”<sup>129</sup> Akçam quotes renowned Turkish social scientist Tarık Zafer Tunaya with noting that their “aim and greatest concern, the beginning and end of their thoughts were with rescuing the state.”<sup>130</sup> He was referring to the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that ruled the Ottoman Empire during its last years, but the observation applies equally for their predecessors, as well as for their successors. What is novel about the Kurdish opening is not the pragmatism that it expresses; what sets it apart from the historical pattern is that for the first time, statist pragmatism works to ensure an alignment of statism and societal pluralism.

For the last two centuries, the ruling bureaucratic elites of Turkey and its predecessor state, the Ottoman Empire, have been haunted by the same perennial dilemma. As they strove to keep the state strong, indeed alive at all, the ruling elites groped with the question of how to cope with the reality of a mul-

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<sup>128</sup> “Yeni anayasa gelecekse onu da Tüsiad getirir,” *Zaman*, August 28, 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, New York: Holt, 2007, p. 53.

<sup>130</sup> Tunaya, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 53.

tiethnic, heterogeneous society. For much of this period, the expressions of societal diversity have been deemed detrimental to the overriding concern of shoring up the state. For more than a century, the answers to the perennial question of how state power was going to be secured in a geographical setting marked by a multitude of identities have ranged from ethnic cleansing to assimilation. Although the extent of coercion and violence has varied, the basic assumption has been that society needs to be cowed, that its diversity must be neutralized, either homogenized or purged, in order for the state to survive and prosper.

The rulers of modern day Turkey are heirs to a state-based philosophy that has lasted for seven hundred years, since the founding of the Ottoman state. Indeed, the roots of that tradition arguably stretch even further back in history. There is “a long Turkish cultural tradition, born in Central Asia and pre-dating conversion to Islam that figured a sacralization of the state, which has vested its modern signifier, “devlet,” with an aura of unusual potency.”<sup>131</sup> The rulers of the state had been engaged in a prolonged but ultimately failed quest for secure, societal foundations for the state. First, they had attempted to bind the peoples of the empire to a common, Ottoman identity, with the introduction, hesitantly and ambiguously, of the alien, Western concept of equal citizenship. But when the attempted liberal reforms of the first half of the nineteenth century provoked the ire of the Sunni Muslim majority, (channeled in particular through the Nakshibendi Islamic brotherhood) which was repelled by the notion of the Christian and Jewish “infidels” being treated as the equals of Muslims, the state had backtracked and sought to promote an ultimately unsatisfying Pan-Islamic ideology instead. Then, in the wake of the disastrous Balkan wars at the beginning of the 1910s, the Unionists finally opted for Turkish nationalism as state ideology; however, they “did not mind which particular element of the (Pan-Islamic or Pan-Turkic) ideology was emphasized.”<sup>132</sup> “If it became necessary to jettison one ideology and adopt another, they had no compunction in doing so.”<sup>133</sup> Historian Akçam asserts that “one of the most significant signs that the Turkish nationalism of the CUP was the result of political calculation, and could be dispensed with at

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<sup>131</sup> Perry Anderson, “Kemalism,” *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2008.

<sup>132</sup> Feroz Ahmad, quoted in Akçam, p. 53.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

any time, was the lack of political influence of Turkist ideologues within the Unionist movement. Astonishingly, the theoreticians of Turkish nationalism, like (Yusuf) Akçura, never played an important role in the inner circles of the party. The CUP's pragmatism was evident in 1913, when Turkism was the dominant ideology. The party nonetheless decided to pursue an Islamist course as a concession to the Arab provinces."<sup>134</sup>

The Unionists were zealous only in their advancement of the cause of the sacred state. The CUP introduced a comprehensive policy of demographic engineering, and carried through the ethnic cleansing of the Armenians and the Assyrians. The remaining Christians of Anatolia, the Greeks, were purged in the aftermath of the nationalist victory in 1922. It is estimated that almost one-third of the Anatolian population, more than two million people, were either relocated or killed<sup>135</sup> between 1915 and 1923. The 'ethnic engineering' of the Turkish state put an end to two millennia of Christian civilization in Asia Minor. With only Muslims left in Anatolia, except few, inconsequential Christian remnants, the new Turkish state faced a much easier task as it set out to tailor itself a pliant society. In the prescient description of political scientist Süleyman Seyfi Ögün, what was to be constructed was a state-nation, not a nation-state.<sup>136</sup> Initially, he notes, the state settled upon a Turkish-Pagan synthesis as common denominator of the nation that was to be molded.

Kemalism, observes historian Perry Anderson in his seminal essay on Turkey, "fashioned for instruction the most extravagant mythology of any interwar nationalism. By the mid-1930s, the state was propagating an ideology in which the Turks, of whom Hittites and Phoenicians in the Mediterranean were said to be a branch, had spread civilization from Central Asia to the world, from China to Brazil; and as drivers of universal history, spoke a language that was the origin of all other tongues, which were derived from the Sun-Language of the first Turks."<sup>137</sup> Anderson holds that such megalomania "reflected the extent of the underlying insecurity and artificiality of the official enterprise: the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>136</sup> Neşe Düzel, Süleyman Seyfi Ögün, "Büyük şans, Türk-Kürt gettosu yok," *Taraf*, 9-10 August 2010.

<sup>137</sup> Anderson, "Kemalism."

less there was to be confident of, the more fanfare had to be made out of it.”<sup>138</sup> Indeed, there was perhaps a deeper logic of this process that merited reflection: Anderson calls attention to the suggestion of Turkish sociologist Çağlar Keyder who described “the desperate retroactive peopling of Anatolia with ur-Turks in the shape of Hittites and Trojans as a compensation mechanism for the emptying by ethnic cleansing at the origins of the regime.”<sup>139</sup>

However, the state elite very soon recognized that it was Islam that bound people together and that to dispense with it was to jeopardize the state. “The elites Sunnified the state-nation project, institutionalizing the Sunni Islam which had initially been abhorred. The ‘mind of the state,’ ever pragmatic, readjusted as it found itself compelled to accept the Sunni variable that it had sought to discard at the outset. Loyalty to the state became equated with being Sunni Muslim and Turkish,” reminds political scientist Öğün.<sup>140</sup> The Kurds, he notes, were included as long as they called themselves Turks, but were otherwise excluded; displays of a Kurdish identity were deemed to be expressions of disloyalty to the state, and were hence persecuted. The Kemalist republic succeeded, not without recourse to violence, in molding a large part of the Muslim population of Anatolia – that was made up of indigenous peoples and of refugees from the Balkans and the Caucasus – into a nation “happy to call itself Turkish.” Nevertheless, the policies of decreed assimilation were not only to fall short of the objective of turning the recalcitrant Kurds into Turks – although some Kurds did assimilate not least as a result of intermarriages – but resulted in provoking the emergence of a militant Kurdish nationalism that has come close to imperiling the state.

Ultimately, the attempt to force assimilation, far from offering a solution to the perennial dilemma of the state, had revealed itself to be counterproductive: it had denied the state the stability and security that had eluded it for two centuries. The implication of the Turkish state’s pragmatic accommodation of religion is that it would not be unreasonable to expect it to eventually perform a similar adaptation with regard to ethnicity. One may indeed wager, given the historical record, that with time, an expansion of the identity of the state

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Neşe Düzel, Süleyman Seyfi Öğün, “Büyük şans, Türk-Kürt gettosu yok,” *Taraf*, 9-10 August 2010.



nation, so as to include the Kurdish variable, is going to appear increasingly sensible for the political and bureaucratic elites. "The mind of the state has an extremely pragmatic worldview," Ögün maintains. "Sooner or later it softens. And thus we will see a new state, adapted to a new world and to a new Turkey, emerge"<sup>141</sup>, he predicts. That new Turkey, expressing the ultimate reconciliation of the state with the societal diversity of Anatolia, might have binational foundations.

Such optimism about the expected evolution of Turkey is sustained not only by the conviction that the inherent pragmatism of the state is preordained to prevail. It relies on equal measure on an assessment of the ruling AKP as a fundamentally post-national party, and on the assumption that Turkish society is evolving beyond nationalism. It assumes that the ascendancy of the AKP heralds the advent of a post-national Turkey, with the ruling party embodying what is presumed to be a societal evolution away from oppressive nationalism.

The AKP has no alternative, asserts Ögün, but of pursuing democratization. "The AKP cannot say, "now we have settled our fight with the state, the state has now, in the final analysis, accepted our norms, so let us now together (the AKP and the state) pick a fight with the Kurds." The democratization of which the AKP is a part would exclude that option. Indeed, that would amount to the AKP severing the branch on which it rests, because the capital on which it depends would be harmed by internal strife. Anatolian capitalism will resist the return to a situation like the one that prevailed before [the coup of] September 12 [1980]."<sup>142</sup> The assumption that the conservative, pious Turkish middle class is prepared to embrace a liberal, post-national and post-statist vision does indeed hold common currency among liberal intellectuals in Turkey. Yet it needs to be challenged.

As much as the Turkish nation has been the artificial construct of a state in need of a social base, nationhood has nevertheless been deeply internalized, and the state is viscerally venerated by the Turks – by religious conservative and secularist nationalists alike – as the indispensable guardian of the nation. The historical quest of the state for secure societal foundations is still not

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

over; the Kurdish opening represents its latest phase, but above all, it expresses the enlightenment of the 'mind of the state'. Yet the Turkish nation that the state has brought into fruition is to a much lesser extent prompted to reconsider the ethno-ideological foundation of the state. If the attempt to reconcile statism and freedom ultimately proves to be futile, it will so because the state has been a little too successful in its historic endeavor, as what was once founded as a state-nation has since congealed into a true nation-state in the popular, Turkish imagination.

Seeing through the Kurdish opening successfully will require vigorous leadership, and notably an ideological resolve to confront the nationalism and statism of Turkish society. That in turn means that ruling Sunni conservatism will first have to sort out its own ambiguous relation to Turkish nationalism, and be prepared to challenge, without equivocation, its innate, historically deposited conceptions of the 'sacred' state.

## Slaying the Zombies?

The Kurdish opening was in fact not the first “opening” to be launched by the AKP government. The first departure from the orthodoxies of the Turkish republic had been announced early in the first term of the AKP. The AKP government had displayed the audacity to change Turkey’s course on the Cyprus issue, acquiescing to the re-unification of the divided island in accordance with the plan that bore the name of the then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. As it were, the Cypriot opening of the AKP government failed to yield the much hoped result, as the UN sponsored peace accord was rejected by the Greek Cypriots in a referendum in 2004. However, the opening did come close to triggering a coup against the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as its conciliatory stance toward the Greek Cypriots, and readiness to be forthcoming toward the European Union, were seen as amounting to treason in the ranks of the military.<sup>143</sup> The subsequent “opening,” the since stalled attempt at rapprochement with another historical foe, Armenia, has similarly failed to live up to the high expectations with which it was initially met by the international community and by the liberal intelligentsia in Turkey.

Baskın Oran, a prominent Turkish intellectual, describes Armenia, Cyprus and the Kurds as “Turkey’s zombies,” as hidden injustices that were unmentionable until recently. “When we created this nation, we tried to put the dead bodies in the closet, and now they have come back as the three zombies – the Kurds, Cyprus and Armenia. Other countries have such zombies, but we have three at the same time, and we alone created them, and they are all related. Until we can face them and deal with them, we will not be a viable nation,” he asserts.<sup>144</sup> The Kurdish, Cypriot and Armenian issues are indeed related; in one way or another they all evoke a history of ethnic cleansing and forced assimilation that Turkey has to date found utterly difficult to admit, let

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<sup>143</sup> Hasan Cemal, *Türkiye’nin Asker Sorunu*, İstanbul Doğan kitap, 2010, pp. 91-131.

<sup>144</sup> Doug Sanders, “Can Erdoğan Slay Turkey’s Zombies?,” *The Globe and Mail*, 29 May 2010.

alone deal with in a spirit that dares to challenge nationalist assumptions and self-righteousness. Cyprus was a British possession at the inception of the Turkish republic; yet it is nevertheless justified to include it in the same context as the Armenian and Kurdish issues; the latter do relate more directly to the genesis of Turkey, but so does the Greek issue, of which the Cypriot stand-off in a sense is a left-over. What Oran suggests is that the failure to come to terms with its troubled, indeed tragic past will inhibit Turkey's future.

The AKP is the first governing party in Turkey to employ a rhetoric that ventures beyond the confines of the official, Turkish nationalist discourse. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdoğan committed the heresy of stating that “for years, those who were of a different ethnicity were expelled from our country. This was in fact the result of a fascist mentality.”<sup>145</sup> The choice of the word fascism was truly startling. The Kemalists were duly incensed, while liberals were heartened by what they presumed was a harbinger of an impending revision of the historical narrative of the republic. Erdoğan was referring to the fate of the Greeks of Istanbul, who had been allowed to remain in Turkey after the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1922-23, but who were subsequently forced to leave in two major waves, in 1955 and in 1964. The prime minister had specifically in mind what is known in Turkey as the “incidents of September 6 and 7” in 1955, when a Turkish nationalist mob had gone on a rampage in the Greek quarter in Istanbul, in what was in fact a pogrom planned by and executed under the auspices of the state itself. “I was the first one to admit the heavy responsibility that the events of September 6 and 7 have placed on our shoulders”<sup>146</sup>, Erdoğan stated. Furthermore, the AKP government has notably, albeit belatedly, taken steps to restore the properties of the foundations of the Christian minorities that had been expropriated by the republic.

However, Erdoğan and the AKP lack consistency. Only a week before he announced his historic verdict over the persecution of the Greek minority, Erdoğan had threatened Armenian citizens working in Turkey with expulsion. “If need be, we will send these back,” he had warned, referring to the

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<sup>145</sup> Baskın Oran, “Laik ülkemizde etno-dinsel temizlikler,” *Radikal*, 31 May 2009.

<sup>146</sup> “Allah Prompterinden Ayırmasın,” *Taraf*, 21 March 2010.

estimated 100,000 citizens of the Republic of Armenia residing in Turkey.<sup>147</sup> Historian Taner Akçam was inclined to interpret the threat uttered by the prime minister as an instinctive, nationalist gut reaction: “Unfortunately, when they speak without thinking first, our Muslims tend to be very nationalist. The same goes with Erdoğan. When he has a prepared speech in front of him, and as long as he sticks to it, he can sound like a democrat. Turkish Islam has a strong nationalist current.”<sup>148</sup> Erdoğan’s designation of the ethnic cleansing of the Greeks as fascism notwithstanding, the mentality of the past indeed still appeared to be very much alive in the AKP government. The defense minister, Vecdi Gönül, was certainly not offering up any apologies for the expulsion of the Greeks when he rhetorically inquired “would we have been a nation-state if the Greeks and the Armenians had still been around?”<sup>149</sup>

Indeed, the nation still loomed large for the Sunni conservatives, perhaps just as much as it did for their secularist nationalist adversaries. Several statements of Prime Minister Erdoğan, as well of other representatives of the AKP government – such as the particularly suggestive one of defense minister Gönül – do seem to vindicate the judgment of those who maintain that the AKP, whatever other appearances may suggest, remains true to the basic tenets of Turkish nationalism. Erdoğan has on several occasions reiterated his adherence to the concept of a culturally monolithic nation. In a speech that he delivered in the city of Hakkari in the Kurdish Southeast in 2009, Erdoğan exhorted his audience to rally around “one language, one nation,” inviting those unable to find that in their heart, to depart the country.<sup>150</sup>

Selahattin Kaya, a former social democratic politician and a Kurdish intellectual, commented that it was nothing wrong with celebrating one state, one homeland and one flag, but that to claim that there was only one nation amounted to an unacceptable denial of the existence of the Kurdish people.<sup>151</sup> Kaya claimed that Islamic conservatism in fact represents a far more formidable foe to the Kurds than Kemalism, which is by now more or less defunct.

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<sup>147</sup> Baskın Oran, “Laik ülkemizde etno-dinsel temizlikler,” *Radikal*, 31 May 2009.

<sup>148</sup> Arife Köse and Taner Akçam, “Tarihimizi hep inkar üzerine, yok saymak üzerine kurduk,” March 25, 2010, [sesonline.net](http://sesonline.net)

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Neşe Düzel, Selahattin Kaya, “Paşalar cenazeye gidemeyecek,” *Taraf*, 10 May 2010.

“The Kurds fear the Islamists more than they fear the Kemalists, because the former are backed by religion. Today, we have reached the end of the Kemalist regime, but not of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which is a young and dynamic force. Ultimately, the modernists (the Kemalists) and the Islamists share the same mentality. They are both Turkish nationalists. Take for instance Tayyip Erdoğan. He has given up on (introducing) the Sharia, but he could never abandon the Turkish-Islamic synthesis.”<sup>152</sup> Yet Turkish nationalists were leveling the very opposite accusation against the AKP and its leader, namely that he had abandoned Turkish nationalism; they could, and did, pick statements that appeared to be vindicating their conviction that Erdoğan was in the business of dismantling Turkishness as the foundation of the state.

Scholars Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan note that “Erdoğan has been trying to stress the Islamic and citizenship aspects in order to redefine nationhood and undermine its Turkish aspect. He has constantly shifted his position on the issue, however.”<sup>153</sup> Yavuz and Özcan conclude that the AKP “seeks to provide a more multicultural understanding of nationhood”<sup>154</sup>, and note that “Erdoğan’s differentiation of primary and sub-national identities has further aggravated the suspicion (of Turkish secularist nationalists) toward him.”<sup>155</sup> Observing that Erdoğan made the case for citizenship rather than Turkish identity as a supra-identity for Turks and Kurds in one speech, only to stress single nationhood in a subsequent speech that he delivered in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır just a few days later, Yavuz and Özcan advanced the suggestion that “this gap between the two speeches indicates his lack of understanding of the problem.”<sup>156</sup> Yet it seems more reasonable to assume that the inconsistency of Erdoğan is a function of political expediency; it is something that speaks of the divisions that run through Turkish society, as well as within the AKP itself, and that the prime minister surely understands that he has no choice but to juggle with.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan, “The Kurdish Question and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14 no. 1, Spring 2006, p. 112.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

It is the tension between Islamists and plain, Sunni conservatives within the AKP that account for Erdoğan's inconsistencies, explains Ümit Aktaş, a prominent Turkish Islamist intellectual.<sup>157</sup> Aktaş, an insider to the Islamic movement in Turkey, makes the case that the Sunni conservative current, which embraces a narrow, Turkish nationalism, and the Islamists who represent an opposite, "more Ummah-oriented, universalist vision" needs to be distinguished. Prime Minister Erdoğan, President Gül, former speaker of the parliament Bülent Arınç, Interior minister Atalay and Erdoğan's chief advisor Yalçın Akdoğan, are Islamists – and consequently non-nationalists – while Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek and defense minister Vecdi Gönül are conservatives (and thus by definition nationalists).<sup>158</sup> "It is the Islamists and the Islamist intellectuals that are the driving force of the AKP, but as a political party the AKP is largely dependent on what constitutes a conservative (and Turkish nationalist) base,"<sup>159</sup> he explains. The Islamists had rebelled against the traditionalism – and the Turkish nationalism – of the conservative religious National Outlook movement (Milli Görüş) in the 1980s. "In fact, the movement that is called "Islamism" or "political Islam" arose to a certain extent in opposition to the nationalism that had poisoned the conservative masses. The nationalism of the National Outlook movement was subjected to serious criticism (by Islamist intellectuals)."<sup>160</sup> He points out that the Islamists, as they are guided by the Quran, arrive at the conclusion that the Kurds cannot be denied their identity: "They say that if the Kurds do have their distinct language and an ethnic identity, then they are indeed entitled to express it freely and to speak their language. We cannot impose any restrictions on it."<sup>161</sup>

However, Mustafa Erdoğan, a leading liberal intellectual, argues that nationalism has prevailed over Islam in the final analysis: "I would say that it is nationalism that controls religiosity [in the AKP]."<sup>162</sup> He calls attention to the confluence of Turkish nationalism, Islam and statism. "Theoretically, reli-

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<sup>157</sup> Neşe Düzel, Ümit Aktaş, "İslamcılar kadın çalışsın ister," *Taraf*, 11 January 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mustafa Erdoğan, "Amaç Kürtleri AKP'lileştirmek," *Taraf*, 1 February 2010.

giosity and nationalism may not be reconcilable, but they have nevertheless become integrated in Turkey.”<sup>163</sup> Erdoğan traces the origin of that confluence to the heritage of state omnipotence in the Turkish realm. With the state traditionally being in charge of religion, the two have to all intents and purposes become indistinguishable in the public mind, he explains. When the modern state chose nationalism as its ideology, conservative Muslims, accustomed to obey the holders of authority, and naturally inclined to revere a state that had represented faith since time immemorial, had little difficulty in appropriating the new ideological attire. Furthermore, a perpetual fear for anarchy, *'fitna'*, which has historically haunted Turkish Islamic culture, has had a major impact; ultimately, the state is revered as the rampart against ever-threatening internal strife and the subsequent dissolution of society. Whereas the liberal Western tradition of political thought posits that it is the duty of the state to defer to civil society, it has been the other way around in Turkish and Islamic political philosophy; it has been, and remains axiomatic that the absence of an omnipotent state regimenting society would inevitably invite disintegration. “The cultural code of our people dictates that the state, authority, will have to be obeyed regardless of whether it is tyrannical and evil. It must be kept in mind that this is the foundation on which the AKP rests,”<sup>164</sup> Mustafa Erdoğan insists.

Indeed, Fethullah Gülen, the influential Muslim preacher, has notably stated that “even the worst kind of state is better than chaos.”<sup>165</sup> Commenting on that statement, conservative columnist Taha Akyol underlined that it in fact expressed what has been one of the very fundamental tenets of the millennial Sunni political doctrine, already laid down in the verses of the Quran that deem *'fitna'* to be more heinous a crime than murder.<sup>166</sup> “This is the principle that bestows legitimacy today on the authority of the secular state.”<sup>167</sup> The state does not need to be “Islamic” in order to enjoy legitimacy, Akyol reminds. As has already been noted, Turkish nationalism was articulated in response to the challenge of shoring up the state; it is thus primarily instrumen-

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. Indeed, that goes a long way in explaining why Kemalism could succeed in the first place.

<sup>165</sup> Taha Akyol, “Devlet ve kaos,” *Milliyet*, 14 June 2010.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.



tal to its character rather than exalted. A typical Turkish reaction to the demands of the Kurds is to ask what would happen if everyone else in Turkey – Circassians, Georgians, Bosnians, Albanians, Arabs and all other ethnic groups – were to ask for the same rights, if they demanded education in their own languages as well. The notion of ethnic superiority is undeniably inherent to Turkish nationalism. “There can be no question of [Turkish-Kurdish] equality,” one senior AKP parliamentarian impressed. He reminded that “it is a fact that cannot be overlooked that Sunni Turks constitute 80 percent of the population.” Indeed, Sunni Turkish supremacy has deep historic roots: “Among the empire’s Muslim Turks a belief in the “ruling nation” or “Millet-i Hakime” prevailed,” Akçam argues.<sup>168</sup> The words of one of the early propagandists of Turkish nationalism evoke the near-similar statement of the AKP parliamentarian a century later: “Say what you want, but the ruling nation in this country is and will be the Turks.”<sup>169</sup> Leftist intellectual Ahmet İnsel argues that “the same problem has pursued us since the Reform Edict of 1856, which decreed the principle of the universal equality of all peoples of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman ruling nation deemed the Imperial Edict the worst disaster that had ever befallen on it. The Sunni Turkish population cannot accept equality with those who are not Turkish and Sunni.”<sup>170</sup>

Yet the case can nevertheless also be made that Turkish nationalism, in the final analysis, is in fact less racist and supremacist than it is defensive. Social scientist Ahmet Özer calls attention to the fact that Turkish nationalism is indeed strongest among the descendants of the Muslim refugees who were driven from the Balkans and the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and whose ethnic background is all but Turkic.<sup>171</sup> As the memory of the plight of their refugee ancestors still remains fresh, they are apt to clinging to Turkey as a sanctuary and to the Turkish state as an ultimate insurance.

Basically, Turkish attitudes to the assertion of ethnic pluralism are informed by insecurity, by the primordial fear that allowing societal diversity to express itself would result in the state being undone. One liberal intellectual expected

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<sup>168</sup> Akçam, p. 48.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>170</sup> Neşe Düzel, Ahmet İnsel, “Türkler Kürtlerle eşitliği kabul etmiyor,” *Taraf*, 3 August 2009.

<sup>171</sup> Neşe Düzel, Ahmet Özer. “Açılımı istemeyen tasfiye olur,” *Taraf*, 19 October 2009.

that the Turks “who dread statelessness”<sup>172</sup> more than anything else would oppose the reforms altogether. The critics of the AKP claim that the ruling party is bent not on deconstructing state power, but on becoming the party of the state itself. Although Turkish liberals in general support the AKP, there are also those who harbor misgivings about the party’s determination to challenge statism: “The AKP does not necessarily intend to change the system. If only they could be confident that they could appoint a chief of the General staff who would work in harmony with the government, then the problem (of military tutelage) would be solved as far as they are concerned,”<sup>173</sup> asserts Mustafa Erdoğan.

A senior AKP parliamentarian nonetheless assured me that the AKP would never become “the party of the state.” Because, he explained, an AKP that had “internalized the state would be destined to fall from power.” “Society craves change, and those who fail to respond to the demand for change will consequently face electoral defeat.” However, he then went on to add that “the state fetishism of the religious conservatives is the greatest obstacle to Turkey’s democratization and normalization.” He reminded that “we all suffer from the predilection – which we owe to our Mongol-Tatar inheritance – of acquiescing to the supremacy of the state. We simply cannot imagine being able to survive as individuals without the state.” Yet in the final analysis, he was nevertheless confident that the forces of change would prevail, though not necessarily because the AKP had consciously opted for the dismantlement of state supremacy, but because societal freedom loomed as the unwitting consequence of the party’s economic policies. “Unknowingly, we have been in the business of undermining the state, since we have assured that Turkey has remained open to globalization,” he said.

İhsan Bal of the Police Academy similarly stressed the importance of the fact that “the economy has passed from the hands of the state to the citizens.” He challenged the notion that the religious conservative base of the AKP remains addicted to “state fetishism,” claiming that the state on the contrary is no longer worshipped as before. “The mentality of the people of Anatolia is

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<sup>172</sup> Etyen Mahçupyan, “Gorbaçov sendromu,” *Taraf*, 6 November 2009.

<sup>173</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mustafa Erdoğan, “Amaç Kürtleri AKP’lileştirmek,” *Taraf*, 1 February 2010.

evolving from thinking about the state as “sacred” toward imagining a normal state that exists for the purpose of serving the citizens. The mentality has changed because the citizenry has become empowered in economic terms and is globally interconnected.” Indeed, state tutelage had been resoundingly rejected in the general election in 2007 and then in the referendum in 2010. In 2007, it was the tutelage of the coup regime that was rebutted, and in 2010 it was the last vestige of the old system of state tutelage, the high judiciary, that was brought to its knees. Its new economic strength has made the pious middle class decidedly more assertive; it expects the state to show due respect for its cultural identity. And it is not incidental that the AKP has introduced a radically new discourse about the state-society relationship. It is indeed consequential that Turkey becomes accustomed to imagining the state not as an omnipotent entity to which society owes allegiance, but as a servant of the citizenry. Together with growing prosperity which empowers individuals, that will, arguably, ultimately work to ensure that authoritarianism is purged from the cultural fabric of Turkey. In a sense, change has acquired a self-perpetuating dynamic which guarantees that democratization is the inevitable outcome, at least if “what may be, as many scholars have noted, the single most important and well-documented generalization in political science”<sup>174</sup> is to be trusted: “Looking at dozens of countries over decades of development, from South Korea to Argentina to Turkey, one finds that the pattern is strong – a market-based economy that achieves middle-income status tends, over the long run, toward liberal democracy.”<sup>175</sup> Yet it nevertheless imports to note that the AKP’s promotion of freedom is more pragmatic and instrumental than it is principled, and that it suffers from a certain selectivity.

The Sunni doctrine pulls the AKP in opposing directions; there are theological foundations for both statist nationalism and for freedom: The universalism of the message of the Quran points toward Turkish-Kurdish equality, while the Quranic warnings against “fitna,” societal anarchy, have been built upon to develop a ‘state fetishism’ by centuries of Sunni political doctrine. Ultimately, Turkish Sunni conservatives may nonetheless end up having purged nationalism, without necessarily having had to make any prior, conscious choice, just

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<sup>174</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, London: Penguin books, 2009, p. 102.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

like they have “unknowingly” undermined the grip of the state over society by pursuing economic liberalization, as was observed by the senior AKP parliamentarian cited above. The dynamic of change carries Turkey in a direction that may not always represent the conscious choice of the political actors. The words of Senior AKP parliamentarian İhsan Arslan illustrate this point: “We have come to enjoy change. We are achieving results; in fact, we have accomplished much more than we ever imagined would be possible during our years in government.” That spoke against the survival of conservative habits of thought.

Liberal intellectuals such as constitutional scholar Mustafa Erdoğan and Fuat Keyman, a distinguished political scientist, remark that the AKP, even though the party is the vector of change, nonetheless represents a societal stratum that they hold to be innately authoritarian. Unlike the secularist critics of the AKP, Erdoğan and Keyman criticize the AKP not for having brought about changes to the old system of authoritarian statism, but for not being consistent and decisive enough in carrying through liberalization. They assert that change is crippled by an instrumental approach to freedom: “The base of the AKP is not a base that says “no” to authoritarian rule,”<sup>176</sup> claims Erdoğan. “An important part of this base does not mind if the government is oppressive as long as it is itself not subjected to oppression.”<sup>177</sup> He maintains that the religious conservatives crave democratization only inasmuch as it liberates them from oppression. “The principal concern of the core base of the AKP is to rid itself from the oppression that was ushered in by February 28 [the postmodern coup in 1997]”<sup>178</sup> On a similar note, Fuat Keyman argues that Turkey is ravaged by a struggle of the middle classes that is fraught with the gravest of dangers for the future cohesion of society. Keyman distinguishes three middle classes, the old, secular middle class in the western and southern coastal areas that has seen its clout diminish by the day; the rising, pious middle class of the Anatolian heartland; and finally the Kurds in the Southeast who are in the

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<sup>176</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mustafa Erdoğan, “Amaç Kürtleri AKP’lileştirmek,” *Taraf*, 1 February 2010.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

process of acceding to middle class status.<sup>179</sup> He warns that every one of these classes is tempted to seek freedom only for its own sake, denying it to the others.

However, even though he challenges the AKP's adherence to democracy, Mustafa Erdoğan nonetheless concludes that the AKP is "condemned to democracy." Because, he explains, "the AKP cannot carry through democratization and liberalization only in the interest of its own base. If it is going to succeed in liberating its own base, the AKP needs to liberate others as well."<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, Ahmet Altan, the editor of the influential liberal daily *Taraf*,<sup>181</sup> offers a much more pessimistic appraisal of the willingness and ability of the AKP to build such a coalition for democracy. He suggests that the Sunni conservatives have been less than generous toward the other oppressed groups of Turkish society, the Kurds and the Alevis. Altan maintains that the Sunni conservatives are not appealed by the specter of the others of society enjoying the same freedoms which they claim for themselves; their attitudes, he asserts, remain informed by "nationalist and sectarian reflexes."<sup>182</sup> An AKP that fails to mobilize the support of the Kurds and the Alevis by defending forcefully their rights will never succeed in truly exerting power, in rolling back "the oppressive power of the state."<sup>183</sup> Another liberal intellectual, Etyen Mahçupyan, similarly notes that the AKP has no choice but to pursue the Kurdish opening, since its own power ultimately depends on it being able to emancipate the country from the grip of militarism, which will be perpetuated as long as the Kurdish problem remains unsolved.<sup>184</sup> "A Turkey where priority is accorded to the security elite can never become democratic," impressed a senior member of the AKP.

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<sup>179</sup> Neşe Düzel, Fuat Keyman, "Türkiye'de üç orta sınıf kavga ediyor," *Taraf*, 8 February 2010.

<sup>180</sup> Neşe Düzel, Mustafa Erdoğan, "Amaç Kürtleri AKP'lileştirmek," *Taraf*, 1 February 2010.

<sup>181</sup> *Taraf* has played a crucial role in influencing public perceptions of the military with its reporting on alleged coup schemes.

<sup>182</sup> Ahmet Altan, "İki tür," *Taraf*, 3 September 2010.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Etyen Mahçupyan, "Gorbaçov sendromu," *Taraf*, 6 November 2009.

To conjure up the specter of a supposed “enemy within” has historically been instrumental to the purpose of legitimizing state authoritarianism.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, according to a source that enjoys access to the General staff, “it is not inconceivable that the military will use the Kurdish issue as a pretext for seizing power.” However, that was suggested in early 2009, a time at which the civilian control over the armed forces was yet to be forcefully asserted and when the military still enjoyed legal impunity. Today, a military coup has become inconceivable, although there are those who warn that Turkey’s “military problem,” the proclivity of the armed forces to interfere in politics, is far from having been resolved. Hasan Cemal, a prominent liberal journalist, fears if not a coup, than that the rigid mentality of the military, its resistance to reconsider the Kurdish issue, “will once again take the civilian political cadres captive, as has been the case in the past.”<sup>186</sup> Notably, the new chief of the General Staff General Işık Koşaner saw fit to remind that “change for the sake of change cannot be defended”<sup>187</sup> as he took office in August 2010. Yet such statements are of much less consequence today since the military no longer calls the shots in Turkey.

Speaking in April 2010, Fatma Şahin, a deputy chairperson of the AKP, assured me that the opening was still continuing. She argued that the ongoing preparations to introduce a “civilian constitution” proved that the opening was not over. Yet the constitutional amendments that were approved in a referendum on September 12, 2010, did not include any changes that address the demands of the Kurds. However, such changes may indeed be forthcoming. During the campaign for the referendum, the representatives of the AKP insisted that the amendments were only the prelude to a forthcoming, comprehensive overhaul of the constitution, although they refrained from getting into any specifics. The deputy chairman of the AKP’s parliamentary group, Ayşenur Bahçekapılı, was more outspoken in an interview in November 2009, when she stated without any equivocation that the constitution was indeed going to be purged from its dictate that every citizen be referred to as a

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<sup>185</sup> Ahmet İnsel, Michel Marian, *Dialogue sur le tabou arménien*, Paris: Éditions Liana Levi, 2009, p. 136.

<sup>186</sup> Hasan Cemal, “Başbuğ ve Koşaner’in konuşmalarından 15 nokta,” *Milliyet*, 29 August 2010.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

Turk.<sup>188</sup> “Of course,” she answered, stating that “otherwise you cannot carry out democratization.” “Everyone is going to be able to express their own ethnic origins, and being the “citizen of the republic of Turkey” will constitute their supra-identity. This, you see, is going to resolve the problem.”<sup>189</sup>

Bahçekapılı, a former leftist who had been politically active in social democratic parties prior to her election to parliament as an AKP deputy in 2007 does not necessarily speak for the main, Sunni conservative current of the AKP. Fatma Şahin told me that Bahçekapılı “has since qualified her opinions.” Nonetheless, a careful reading of what the AKP promises to realize within the framework of the opening does suggest that the party may not be a stranger to the notion of redefining citizenship and of ridding the constitution of Turkish nationalist dictates. After having stated that the long-term aim of the opening is to supply Turkey with “a civilian and democratic constitution,” the AKP specifies that “the first three statutes and the founding principles of the republic are to be kept unchanged.”<sup>190</sup> In fact, the present constitution precludes the very act of proposing any changes to these statutes. The immutable statutes lay down that the state is a republic, that “Atatürkist nationalism,” secularism, democracy and the rule of law are its core values, and that the state and its nation are an undivided whole, with the official language of the unitary state being Turkish. The crucial articles in the context of the Kurdish opening – if it is going to entail a constitutional overhaul in the long run – are the articles 42 and 66, respectively. Presumably, the 10 percent threshold to parliament that was introduced specifically to bar Kurdish parties from gaining parliamentary representation, would also be absent from a new, democratic constitution worthy of its name.

As has been noted, article 42 of the constitution of Turkey prohibits education in any mother tongue other than Turkish. Article 66 states that “everyone who is bound to Turkey by bonds of citizenship is a Turk.” The representatives of the Kurdish movement never tire of reminding that Article 66 not only fails to include the Kurdish people but that it is offensive to the Kurds as it denies their existence. In fact, the AKP’s declaration of its intent to substi-

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<sup>188</sup> Neşe Düzel, Ayşenur Bahçekapılı, “Başbakan hayatını riske atıyor,” *Taraf*, 30 November 2009.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> AKP, *Soruları ve Cevaplarıyla Demokratik Açılım Süreci*, p. 122.

tute the current constitution with a “civilian” one, except for the first three statutes, seems to suggest that the critical articles 42 and 66 would indeed be rewritten so as to provide an ethnically neutral, inclusive definition of citizenship and in order to enable Kurdish to become a language of education. If on the other hand, the AKP does not harbor any such intentions, if these articles are going to be left untouched, then it does not make any sense to declare that the opening will be carried out in three stages, culminating with the introduction of a new constitution.

In its official brochure about the Kurdish opening,<sup>191</sup> the AKP defends that “Turkish is the language of education, and will so remain. There are no preparations undertaken within the process of the Democratic opening to make the different languages spoken in Turkey languages of education.” The brochure is basically a defensive document, an attempt to counter the charges of the Turkish nationalist opposition, and should of course not be taken at face value. It also pledges that the AKP government will never treat any “illegal organization” as its interlocutor<sup>192</sup> or sit down to negotiate with its representatives, something that the government and other state agencies have by all accounts done with Abdullah Öcalan. The estimates of the intellectual mentors of the Kurdish opening offer a more reliable guide to the ultimate direction of the opening than the necessarily cautious political discourse. “The unitary nature of the state will be kept, as will its flag. But there will be devolution of power to local administrations, and the final point of the openings will be reached with education in the mother tongue.”<sup>193</sup> To pledge, as the AKP has done, to retain the “immutable” Atatürkist introduction to the constitution, while simultaneously working to loosen the Turkish nationalist straightjacket on Anatolian society would seem contradictory, but can in fact be reconciled. As has been argued above, ethnic purity was always an instrument rather than a goal in itself; it was the integrity of the state that Atatürkist nationalism had sought to ensure. And although Atatürkist nationalism has privileged Turkishness as the sole norm, it could nonetheless be reinterpreted as civic nationalism. Accommodation of multi-ethnicity could thus be defended as being true to the spirit of the “immutable” template of the republic as long as

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>193</sup> Neşe Düzel, İhsan Bal, “İspanya’daki kısmi af gelebilir,” *Taraf*, 24 August 2009.



the “unitary nature of the state” is preserved, indeed as liberalization has imposed itself as the *sine qua non* of the survival of the state.

Prominent Kurdish AKP politician İhsan Arslan told me “we will see where this will end.” He was no stranger to the prospect that the process might eventually end with a joint, Turkish-Kurdish state. It was a return to 1920 that loomed in his imagination. Arslan did not mind if the republic, which he held to have been raised on “unhealthy foundations,” was recast, fulfilling the initial expectations of the Kurds. The Kurdish tribes had been led to believe back in 1920 that they were going to be equal partners in the new state that was going to be established once they and the Turks had succeeded in chasing the invading Greek forces out of Anatolia. “The Kurds are certainly going to ask for it,” he ventured. “The white Turks [As the Turkish secularist middle class has come to be known] are going to find it hard indeed to get accustomed to equality (with the Kurds), but they nevertheless need to get used to it. But that also depends on the other side being reasonable in its demands.”

## “Real” Kurds and “Mature” Turks

Ultimately, the Kurdish opening relies on the assumption that Turkey has matured, making the country ready to embrace full democratization. Interior Minister Atalay had notably stated that the opening was an expression of the government’s “trust in society.”<sup>194</sup> İhsan Bal developed the reasoning further: “At a popular level, Turkey has become ripe (for the opening). What has to be done from now on is that we in the leadership levels make sure that we turn the right keys”<sup>195</sup>. The opening presupposed that Turkey had reached a level of political “maturity” commensurate with the society’s level of economic development. “In the sense that Turkey is becoming a country in which changes that concern democracy, the law, the standards of human rights are offered, not as favors from above, but are being demanded from below, the Turkish revolution is attaining its apogee and is maturing.”<sup>196</sup> Two fundamental changes were seen to confirm this maturity: “While in the past everyone used to retreat into their homes when a coup took place, in today’s Turkey we can observe that a significant part of society questions and challenges what goes on.”<sup>197</sup> In this view, violence – by the state and by the PKK – had become equally repugnant for many Turks and Kurds alike. The mentality of not questioning the deeds of the state, the presumption that “if the state has deemed something necessary, then it is for the best,” the acquiescence to the violence exercised by the state, is indeed on retreat. It is a telling sign that it has become possible to publicly broach the crimes that were committed in the Kurdish Southeast by the death squads of the state during the 1990s. And concurrently, Kurdish voices have begun to be raised against the violence of the PKK. In July 2010, ninety-nine Kurdish NGOs in Diyarbakır signed a

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<sup>194</sup> Sevımay, p. 291.

<sup>195</sup> Unpublished transcript that summarizes interview with İhsan Bal of the Police Academy, in *Star*, 18 December 2009.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

joint declaration that called upon the Turkish state, and notably the PKK, to halt the violence.

The Kurdish opening was conceived of as an attempt to seize upon this, as it seemed, promising development among the Kurds – the rise of a Kurdish civil society that did not owe allegiance to the PKK, paralleling the rise of a Turkish civil society that no longer acquiesced to being subservient to the state and that did not condone state violence. “As a result of the process of democratization, the real Kurds will be able to take to the stage.”<sup>198</sup> The ‘real Kurds’ were those who did not condone the violence exercised in their name by the PKK that had allegedly become an ‘Apoist’ organization whose chief, and indeed only concern, was the fate of its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The ‘real Kurds’ were to be found among the representatives of the NGOs, the bar associations and the chambers of commerce and industry in the Kurdish Southeast. It fell upon the Turkish state to “clear the way for this societal base,”<sup>199</sup> and to Turkish society to approach the Kurdish civil society with empathy. “If the west [of Turkey] reaches out to these groups, it will contribute to the evolution of Kurdish politics,”<sup>200</sup> said İhsan Bal. Yet in this view, empathy and reaching out was not going to suffice; democracy was but one facet of the Kurdish opening. The opening came not only with an outstretched hand, but with a fist as well.

What to most observers seemed to be an inexplicable contradiction was in fact never a contradiction for the ‘mind of the state’ that had conceived the opening. As has been noted above, many observers had trouble making sense of the mass arrests of the Kurdish politicians in the Southeast in December 2009, which followed upon the closure of the Kurdish DTP by the Constitutional Court. Most were subsequently led to conclude that the opening had to all intents and purposes been abandoned. However, the argument is made that Turkish liberal intellectuals have in fact misjudged the operation that was undertaken against the Kurdish KCK, the organization that the Turkish prosecutors accuse of being the civilian, urban branch of the PKK in the Southeast. The eradication of the KCK, and thus of the PKK, does not represent

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

any deviation from the democratic ambitions of the Kurdish opening, but is on the contrary crucial for the success of democratization, holds İhsan Bal. “The state is going to clear the way for free political competition by eradicating the KCK.”<sup>201</sup> The ‘real Kurds’, those who do not tiptoe to the militancy of the PKK but who are cowed by the PKK and its instrument the KCK, would thus, went the reasoning, be able to assert themselves and assume the position of leadership in the Kurdish community. By this account, the mass arrests of the Kurdish politicians were not effectuated in order to appease a Turkish nationalist opinion that had been outraged by the welcome accorded to the homecoming PKK militants in October 2009, although that was obviously a side-effect of the operations that the AKP government could not have but welcomed. The implication is instead that the mass arrests in the Southeast would have been carried out anyway, even if the Kurdish masses had displayed ‘restraint’ when they hailed the returning PKK militants.

The referendum on September 12, 2010 supplied a good measure of the strength of the ‘real Kurds.’ The PKK and the BDP had called on their constituents to boycott the referendum on constitutional reform on the ground that the amendments that were put to popular vote did not address the demands of the Kurds. A substantial majority of the Kurds in the Southeast did indeed boycott the referendum, heeding the calls of the PKK and the BDP. Osman Baydemir even turned the referendum into a personal vote of confidence when he declared that he would resign from his office as Mayor of Diyarbakır if the turnout in Diyarbakır was not significantly below 50 percent. As it happened, a still significant minority of around 30 percent did challenge the authority of the PKK and the BDP and showed up to vote, and did so massively in favor of the constitutional amendments of the AKP government. Yet the boycott had nonetheless been a success insofar as it served to impress that the PKK and the BDP hold sway over a vast majority in the Southeast and that they cannot be circumvented. Indeed, that point had already been driven home by the PKK when the organization had renewed its attacks on the Turkish military at the beginning of the summer of 2010, revealing that it retained its position as the central actor of Kurdish politics. Furthermore, there was no

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. An advisor to Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the Kurdish party BDP, described İhsan Bal as being the chief responsible for the turn that the opening had taken.

ideological difference between the so called “real Kurds” and the PKK and the BDP. Although the representatives of the Kurdish civil society in the South-east did part ways with the PKK regarding violence, the Kurds were in fact united in their identity demands. Those who took issue with the assumption that underlay the opening, that the ‘good Kurds’ were going to emerge once the ‘bad Kurds’ had been incarcerated, pointed out that “the bond between the legal Kurdish movement and the PKK and Öcalan is not superficial and does not, as is often assumed, rely solely on intimidation.”<sup>202</sup>

Grudgingly, the AKP government has come around to accepting the Kurdish movement, represented by the BDP, as a legitimate interlocutor. A year after the Kurdish opening was launched, the tactic of the government had evolved from seeking to marginalize and ultimately eradicate the influence of the BDP (and of the PKK), which it had underestimated, to trying to entice the Kurdish party to moderate its stance so as to make it an acceptable interlocutor. Yalçın Akdoğan, chief advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, appealed to the BDP, exhorting it to become “an actor within the democratic system,” and pointing out that “the state is to a significant degree attempting to keep the BDP within the system.”<sup>203</sup> That sentence hinted that the BDP would otherwise face the prospect of closure. The context of Akdoğan’s article was obviously significant; it was published at a time, in July 2010, when the AKP government was appealing to the PKK, and its leader Abdullah Öcalan, to cease the attacks against the Turkish military that put the government’s prospects in the upcoming referendum on constitutional amendments at risk. Yet it nevertheless translated what appears to be a sincere reconsideration of the tactics that will need to be deployed to ensure a solution of the Kurdish problem. “Ultimately, it is politically possible and indeed natural for the AKP to take the demands and expectations of the BDP into account,” Akdoğan wrote in a subsequent article.<sup>204</sup>

It had somewhat unexpectedly been revealed that the AKP government enjoyed a wider room for maneuver than what had been commonly assumed since the fall of 2009. In the wake of the Habur entrance of the PKK militants

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<sup>202</sup> Oral Çalışlar, “İyi Kürtler üzerinden çokseslilik,” *Radikal*, 29 June 2010.

<sup>203</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, “PKK ne yapmaya çalışıyor?,” *Star*, 5 July 2010.

<sup>204</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, “Eylemsizlik kararı pazarlıkla alınmış değil,” *Star*, 23 August 2010.

in October 2009, the AKP had been led to conclude that it stood to lose electoral ground if it persisted in pursuing the Kurdish opening. The polls in the fall of 2009 showed not only the support for the Kurdish opening declining radically, but suggested that the AKP risked being punished by the voters. In the run-up to the September 12, 2010 referendum, the AKP was similarly assumed to be vulnerable to the charges of the far-right MHP that the governing party was negotiating with 'terrorists'. The conclusion that had appeared to impose itself in the fall of 2009 was that the AKP did not stand to gain anything from challenging Turkish nationalism by catering to ethnic diversity, not to speak of by suggesting that the Turkish state may have to negotiate with the Kurdish movement. Yet the opening had nevertheless initially enjoyed wide public support. The ensuing, dramatic erosion of support translated an initial, emotional gut reaction of the Turkish population against the manifestations of Kurdish nationalism in the wake of the Habur entrance of the PKK militants; it was a precipitate conclusion that it would not be possible to nudge the Turkish majority away from narrow-minded nationalism. The authors of the Kurdish opening had committed the mistake of underestimating the strength of Kurdish nationalism. The 'real' Kurds could not be delimited from the Kurds who support the BDP and the PKK. Concurrently, the Turkish nationalist tidal wave that swept the country in the fall of 2009 had belied the assumption of the authors of the opening that Turkish society had "matured." However, they may have been belatedly vindicated; the strength of Turkish ultra-nationalism may in fact have been overestimated.

Indeed, Cevat Öneş, the former deputy director of the Turkish Intelligence Agency, reminds that "nationalism does not garner the votes that are generally expected in elections."<sup>205</sup> Turkish ultra-nationalism has made a lot of noise in the Turkish debate during the last decade, yet the electoral fortunes of the nationalist parties, the Kemalist CHP and the far right ultranationalist MHP, have never been correspondingly revived. On the contrary, in the run-up to the referendum in September 2010, the support for the CHP hovered around the party's usual level, 24 percent, while the MHP was in dramatic decline, descending toward the vicinity of the 10 percent barrier to parliament<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Üçe bölünme yok, akıl tutulması var," *Radikal*, 17 September 2010.

Turkish ultra-nationalism was indeed the major loser of the September 12 referendum. The referendum was a resounding rebuttal of aggressive ultra-nationalism. The MHP had sought to mobilize support for a 'no' vote to the constitutional changes by playing the Turkish nationalist card. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli urged his sympathizers to punish the AKP government for its Kurdish opening by voting 'no' to the constitutional amendments which he claimed constituted no less than a threat to Turkey's integrity. Yet the MHP was not rewarded for having aggressively assailed the Kurdish opening; on the contrary, the ultranationalist far right sustained heavy losses in its traditional strongholds in central Anatolia, with its base massively shifting over to the 'yes' side. The message of the September 12 referendum was that the AKP need not worry about ceding ground to the MHP by pursuing the opening, barring a renewal of violence. The AKP had, as one commentator put it, "been emancipated from the ultranationalist pressure of the MHP."<sup>207</sup>

However, neither provocations staged by Turkish ultranationalist elements within the 'deep state', or new acts of violence perpetrated by renegade groups within the PKK is unlikely. Yet it is nevertheless not inconsequential that the popular hold of rigid Turkish nationalism has been revealed to be more tenuous than what had been generally assumed. Turkish nationalism is in fact changing colors, in terms of its contents as well as its geographic implantation. Ultra-nationalism is becoming an increasingly "coastal" phenomenon, ever more restricted to the western and southern coastal strips of Turkey to which the Kemalist CHP has long since been confined; it appeals to the secularist middle class in these regions more than it does to the pious conservatives in the Anatolian heartland.

The outcome of the constitutional referendum suggests that the pious middle classes in central Anatolia and in the Black Sea region are put off by aggressive nationalism. The economic development in these regions has given birth to a psychology that privileges a more pragmatic, less confrontational stance, softening the edges of nationalism. "It is not that central Anatolia and the Black Sea region are abandoning nationalism and conservatism, but softer

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<sup>207</sup> Ahmet Insel, "Esas kaybeden MHP'dir," *Radikal*, 13 September 2010.

versions of nationalism and conservatism are being preferred.”<sup>208</sup> Until recently, the AKP and the MHP in fact shared the same constituency in Anatolia; both parties appealed to religiously conservative and nationalist Sunni Turks. The decline of the MHP in the heartland of religiously conservative, yet in the final analysis pragmatic Turkish nationalism, is evidence that the ultra-nationalist far right has lost touch with the evolution of Anatolian conservatism. The ultra-nationalism of the MHP is now more attuned to the mood that has come to prevail among the well-educated, former elite of Turkey, the secularist so-called ‘white Turks’. The MHP has a potentially more receptive audience in western, less religious Anatolia and Thrace than it has in culturally more conservative central Anatolia. Indeed, the changing colors of Turkish nationalism attest to the relationship between economic development and nationalism. It is no coincidence that ultra-nationalism is displaced from the economically thriving Anatolian heartland to the coastal rim. The newfound self-confidence of the ascendant middle class in Anatolia bolsters the development of a pragmatic mind-set. Self-confidence is however in short supply among the politically marginalized secularist middle class in the coastal regions. The secularists find it extremely difficult to reconcile their self-perception as the ‘elite’ of the country with the rise of the despised ‘others’, the pious bourgeoisie and the Kurds. Indeed, what is perceived as the ‘intrusion’ of the Kurds provokes xenophobic reactions. It has been observed that “one important reason why there is opposition to the opening in western Anatolia is Kurdish immigration. There is no Kurdish migration to central Anatolia, but there is migration to the west. That creates competition for jobs among Turks and Kurds, fueling the rise of respective nationalisms.”<sup>209</sup> Those who are most directly affected by the Kurdish immigration in this sense are obviously the lower classes; yet the well-to-do and middle class ‘white Turks’, although not threatened by the newcomers in any economic sense, are nonetheless unsettled by the changes that reshape their accustomed urban environment.

The city of İzmir on the Aegean coast is particularly instructive in this respect: İzmir is traditionally dominated by the ‘white Turks’, and has long

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<sup>208</sup> Oral Çalışlar, “Kürt sorununda MHP engeli ve referandum,” *Radikal*, 15 September 2010.

<sup>209</sup> Neşe Düzgel, Ahmet Özer, “Açılımı istemeyen tasfiye olur,” *Taraf*, 19 October 2009.



since been a stronghold of the Kemalist CHP, notably voting massively against constitutional reform in the September 12, 2010 referendum. İzmir has often pejoratively been referred to as “Infidel İzmir” (Gavur İzmir), by Muslim religious conservatives, with the implication that there is continuity between the pre-1922 era when the city, then Smyrna, had a Christian (Greek and Armenian) majority, and the modern, assertively Kemalist İzmir. Indeed, although multicultural and Christian Smyrna was destroyed in 1922, when much of the city was burned down and its Christian population was evicted,<sup>210</sup> the new city that was built on its ruins has touted a ‘western’ identity. The new İzmir of the republic of Turkey may have counted only Muslim inhabitants, but those were distinctly non-conservative, and ‘Infidel İzmir’ was indeed to remain a cultural enclave, detached from the Muslim conservative Anatolian heartland. İzmir is still an enclave today, yet in an altogether different sense; it has become a sanctuary, not for what is new, but for a dated definition of the ‘modern’, epitomizing the resistance to liberal change. Political scientist Fuat Keyman notes that retrograde Turkish nationalism has taken hold of the inward-looking middle class of the city.<sup>211</sup> That nationalism is defined by hostility toward the West, the pious Muslims, and the Kurds. However, Keyman holds that İzmir does in fact have a potential to eventually produce an enlightened social democracy; he points out that the ideological regression with which the city has lately come to be identified is above all explained by the fear of the secularist middle class that its values and lifestyle are going to be endangered in a Turkey where a new, pious middle class has gained the ascendancy.

There is not necessarily anything fated about ‘white Turkish’ ultra-nationalism; it may be argued that if care was taken to allay the fears that fuel retrograde nationalism, the siege mentality of the ‘white Turks’ could be overcome. The rise of white Turkish retrograde nationalism is ultimately a reaction to AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, suggests scholar İhsan Bal. “The secularists are not closed to change; what they dislike

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<sup>210</sup> For an account that is a corrective to the Turkish nationalist narrative of the destruction of Smyrna, see Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922 - The Destruction of Islam's City of Tolerance*, London: Sceptre, 2009.

<sup>211</sup> Neşe Düzel, Fuat Keyman, “Türkiye’de üç orta sınıf kavga ediyor,” *Taraf*, 8 February 2010.

above all is Erdoğan, with whom change has become associated,” Bal told me. Indeed, as has already been noted, it was a ‘white Turk’, the social democratic leader Erdal İnönü – the son of İsmet İnönü, Atatürk’s closest collaborator and his successor – who had taken the unprecedented initiative in 1991 to ensure that representatives of the Kurdish movement were elected to parliament. The contrast could not be more striking between the social democracy affirming liberal change that Erdal İnönü once aspired to represent, and the Kemalist ultra-nationalism that has been promoted by his successor as the leader of Turkey’s ‘social democrats’, Deniz Baykal, and from which the current CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is finding it so difficult to emancipate. Nonetheless, Turkey is not condemned to repeating past tragedies. Nationalism will ultimately fail to obstruct the opening, and to dim the country’s prospects, suggests one former leading representative of the state security establishment, Cevat Öneş. He insists that “the opening is not over.” “A government that declares the opening to be over and refrains from proposing further steps of democratization has no chance whatsoever of being reelected. It is the party that promises to draft a new constitution and that presents a package of democratic reforms that is going to emerge victorious (in the next general election).”<sup>212</sup> Indeed, the result of the referendum on constitutional reform confirmed that a majority in Turkish society has come to expect change, and that old nationalist habits of thought are perhaps not as ingrained as had been assumed, at least not among the pious, culturally conservative strata of the population. It is premature to conclude that the Sunni conservative Turks have completed their democratic evolution; yet they have certainly made important strides toward reconciling, ultimately, conservatism and nationalism with freedom. It may be equally precipitate to write off the possibility that the secularist minority will ultimately live up to its pretensions of representing ‘enlightenment’ values. Yet that will require an ideological soul-searching of the kind that the secularists have never applied any intellectual energy to. In light of the political-philosophical regression of the secularists during the last decade or so, it has become imperative to revisit the historical narrative about Turkey’s “westernization,” and more specifically to clarify the nature of the relationship between Kemalism and the liberal values that are at

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<sup>212</sup> Neşe Düzel, Cevat Öneş, “Açılımı bitiren siyasetçi seçilemez,” *Taraf*, 21 June 2010.

the core of Western civilization.<sup>213</sup> In the meantime, and in an ultimate twist of irony, the prospect of the Turkish revolution “attaining its apogee and maturing” has largely come to depend on whether or not the Sunni conservative Turks, the despised ‘others’ of the Kemalist endeavor, alongside the Kurds, will be able to sustain a synthesis of conservatism and freedom.

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<sup>213</sup> See Halil M. Karaveli, “An Unfulfilled Promise of Enlightenment: Kemalism and its Liberal Critics,” *Turkish Studies*, Volume 11, Number 1, March 2010.

## Conclusion

Turkey's Kurdish opening represents if not the 'end of history', then at least the culmination of an historical endeavor. It imposes itself as the ultimate answer to the perennial quest of the Turkish state for a secure, societal base, reconciling statism with freedom, the state with societal diversity. The unequivocal lesson of the Turkish history of the last two centuries is that authoritarianism and nationalism have come not only at a terrible human cost, but have also failed to provide a solution to the eternal challenge faced by the Turkish state, to secure itself in its ethnically mixed geographical setting. The Turkish state establishment has, by and large, come to recognize that, with the rise of society that is empowered by economic development rigid statism has ceased to represent a viable option. The contradictory nature of the ruling AKP has worked to encourage the reconciliation of statism with freedom. The AKP has offered the advantage of being a ruling party that represents the perspective of the societal periphery, of thus being unbound by the dogmas of the official, statist ideology, while it has simultaneously sought to, and eventually succeeded in, establishing itself as the new party of the state. Although the AKP is pulled in different directions, with authoritarian statism and nationalism still exerting considerable influence over the party, the dominant socioeconomic trends nevertheless work to sustain a societal diversity, and arguably encourage a further liberalization of societal mores, that ultimately speaks against the long-term survival of unreformed statist-nationalism as the dominant ideology of Turkey.

The two conclusions that impose themselves after one year of 'opening' are, first, that the Kurdish movement cannot be circumvented; and secondly, that the Turkish government cannot dispense with exercising leadership; the anxieties that animate popular Turkish nationalism need to be addressed head-on. Indeed, the Turkish state has come to recognize that it is not possible to by-pass Abdullah Öcalan. In fact, the AKP government enjoys a wider room for maneuver than what had been assumed since the Kurdish opening was

launched. The opening was initially stalled, as the AKP government was intimidated by a Turkish nationalist backlash in the fall of 2009. Yet the outcome of the September 12, 2010 referendum has served to impress that the strength of Turkish ultra-nationalism may in fact have been overestimated, while it concurrently underscored what was already well known, that Kurdish nationalism has a strong hold over the Kurdish, Southeastern region of the country.

A resolution of the Kurdish problem is difficult to imagine as long as the Kurdish minority is denied parliamentary representation. Yet it is highly unlikely that the AKP will abolish the critical 10 percent threshold to parliament before the general election that is due in 2011, since such a step would deny the party the prospect of renewing its absolute majority. The solution to the Kurdish dilemma of the AKP may instead be spelled a transition to a presidential system: With the power of the AKP secured through a partisan, executive president, it would in a sense also become less consequential for the ruling party to allow parliament to become truly representative.

Even though the Kurdish opening expresses what is a fundamental reversal of the traditional state-society relation in Turkey, as it epitomizes the abandonment of a statism that had sought to regiment society, the state, through the leadership it can offer, nonetheless remains indispensable as an agent of change. The primordial fear that animates Turkish nationalism, that the state runs the risk of being undone if pluralism is allowed a free rein, will have to be quelled. That calls for the patient exercise of pedagogical leadership, for a statesmanship that transcends the divisions of Turkish society. A democratic maturity commensurate with the level of the country's socioeconomic development may indeed be within the reach of Turkish society; as growing prosperity seems to soften the edges of their nationalism, the Sunni conservatives may have come to realize, at least intuitively, that only a nation that allows societal diversity to express itself freely can thrive. However, there is very little that suggests that that is anything but poorly, if at all, appreciated by the supposedly "westernized," secularist minority. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has succeeded in fundamentally changing the rules by which Turkish politics is played, by decisively establishing civilian supremacy over the military. The solution of Turkey's 'military problem' has removed a major

obstacle to democratization and significantly enhances the chances of the Kurdish problem being solved. Yet seeing through the Kurdish opening will require not only forceful leadership, but an ability to deploy a persuasive discourse that reaches out to diverse constituencies as well.

Ultimately, it is the answer to the question that was famously posed by the influential nineteenth century French philosopher and writer Ernest Renan – What is a nation? – that Turkey is groping for. Renan’s essay on the nation<sup>214</sup> is the classical text of ‘civic’ nationalism. Repudiating ethnic nationalism, he made the case that what makes a nation is not speaking the same language or belonging to the same ethnographic group; the essential conditions for being a people was common glories in the past, to have performed great deeds together, and to wish to perform still more. Renan notably reminded that language invites people to unite, but that it does not force them do so; offering multilingual Switzerland as an exemplary model, he noted that the will of Switzerland to be united, in spite of the diversity of the country’s dialects, was a fact of far greater importance than a similitude often obtained by vexatious measures. That is an observation that has particular pertinence in the case of Turkey, as the representatives of the Kurdish movement have made it abundantly clear that a recognition of Kurdish as language of education is the sine qua non of a resolution of the conflict. The past, however, offers little solace or pride in the case of Turkey; the vaunted Anatolian heritage is more than anything else tragic, with much of it having been purged. Yet the remaining Anatolians would nevertheless do well to turn to history, not for pride and comfort, which it cannot supply, but for indispensable instruction. Confronting Anatolia’s tragic 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history, deconstructing the nationalist myths and recognizing the distortions that shroud that past, will arguably become less of a traumatic endeavor for a prosperous Turkey. Indeed, as Turkey continues to prosper, there is every reason to assume that the determination ‘to perform still more great deeds’ will prevail, sustaining the cohesion of a pluralistic Turkey.

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<sup>214</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*, Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1997.

## About the Author

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