



### TURKEY'S "KURDISH PROBLEM" – THEN AND NOW

By Nick Danforth



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A decade ago many observers hoped that Turkey's Justice and Development party (AKP) would at long last succeed in consolidating Turkey's troubled democracy. Even as such hopes proved increasingly unfounded, it still seemed possible that the AKP would succeed in a more limited realm by finally bringing an end to the country's long-running "Kurdish problem." Today, though, renewed fighting between the government and the PKK has dashed these hopes as well, making stability in southeastern Turkey seem as elusive as ever.

One way to understand both the AKP's early potential and its eventual failure in regard to the Kurdish question is to examine how the party transformed the language of Turkish nationalism while sustaining its essence.

From the outset, the AKP promised to challenge a nationalist consensus which held, in its starkest form, that Kurds simply didn't exist. The official line, long enshrined in government rhetoric, was that everyone in Turkey was a Turk, should be proud to identify as a Turk, and should quite naturally speak Turkish. While previous politicians in the 1990s had hinted at the inadequacy of this approach and the need for a more inclusive form of national identity, their efforts had largely been thwarted by the resistance of the Turkish military. As the AKP gradually curbed the power of the military, though, it began taking steps towards acknowledging Kurdish identity that would previously have been impossible. AKP leaders referred openly to Turkey's "Kurdish Problem" (which in the past had simply been a "terror problem") and even initiated a government-run Kurdish language television station. Other early steps included occasionally referring to places in southeastern Turkey by their Kurdish names rather than their forcibly-imposed Turkish ones, and promising to remove slogans like "How Happy Is He Who Calls Himself a Turk" written in large letters on mountains above Kurdish villages.

But the AKP government ultimately faced two obstacles in these efforts. The first was winning support for cultural reforms from nationalist voters. The second was making peace with the PKK, a militant group whose use of violence against Turks and Kurds alike had given it a monopoly over Kurdish politics. Ironically, as a result of its failing to overcome both obstacles, the AKP ended up in the strange position of deploying a new, multi-cultural form of Turkish identity that explicitly embraces Kurds in order to justify its ongoing war against self-proclaimed representatives of the country's Kurdish citizens.

Today, in the hands of government leaders, newspaper columnists, and ordinary citizens, a new form of multicultural identity serves as improved propaganda for many of the same oppressive policies once justified by the traditional nationalist history. Central to this new identity is a celebration of not only the Kurds but also less-prominent minorities such as Albanians, Bosnians, Circassians, and many others who came to Anatolia as refugees in the final years of the Ottoman Empire and together built the modern Turkish state. Yet acknowledging the presence of these groups—Muslim immigrants whose descendants are often proud Turkish nationalists—has become a prelude to asking why these groups assimilated when Kurds did not. Since these groups have not demanded linguistic rights or political autonomy, much less resorted to violence, they, like model minorities elsewhere, can serve as a reference point for asking what's wrong with the Kurds. In the words of Binghamton University's Güllistan Yarkin, the question inevitably becomes "Why do the Kurds, unlike Turkey's Laz, Circassians, Pomaks, Arabs, Gypsies, and other ethnic groups, rebel against the state and [constantly cause problems](#)?"

Consider a few quotes to see how this approach works: In late September 2015, the AKP organized a large “anti-terror” rally in which President Erdogan took the lead in presenting Turks and Kurds—“[all those who rally around our flag](#)”—as united in their struggle against a small and unrepresentative group of armed extremists. It is an rhetorical style that builds well on claims he has made in the past, such as “we in this country, Turks and Kurds, Laz, Circassians, Georgians, Abkhaz, Roma, and Bosnians will be united, [but we will never give in to terror](#).”

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, for his part, has put a historical spin on Erdogan’s argument, emphasizing the long tradition of Turks and Kurds joining together for a common cause. Writing Kurds into two foundational moments in Turkish nationalist history, Davutoglu has claimed that Turks and Kurds fought together under Alparslan in the eleventh-century Turkish-Seljuk invasion of Byzantine Anatolia, just as they did in the twentieth century during the Turkish War of Independence.

Pro-government newspaper columnists have gone to even greater lengths to ground such claims in a new version of Turkish history, one that not only emphasizes brotherhood but blames malevolent foreign powers for its disruption. In the pro-government paper *Yeni Safak*, for example, one writer claimed, “Yesterday, the crusaders fought against us, the Turkish and Kurdish Muslims living on this land. Today, for the same reason, [they are attacking Turkey](#).” Two pages later, in a piece titled “[We Are Turks, We Are Kurds](#), Together We Are Turkey,” another writer discussed the powerful, millennia-long civilization that emerged when Turks, Kurds, and even Armenians were united under the Ottoman Empire’s magnanimous rule. Until, of course, the Ottomans were “brought to their knees” during World War I.

In their efforts to challenge Turkey’s nationalist history, many serious scholars have indeed focused on Ottoman tolerance and the multicultural character of Turkey’s war for independence. Yet most would be quick to highlight what the government’s narrative omits. The brotherhood part may be true, but not the simple, often xenophobic explanation of why the brotherhood disappeared. Rather than blaming foreign intrigue, most historians would point to the role of nationalism and the twentieth-century Turkish state’s efforts to forcibly assimilate minorities over the past century. In fact, non-Kurdish minorities often faced the same restrictions as Kurds—restrictions on using their language or even acknowledging their identity. And the Turkish government denied their existence for the same reason it denied that of the Kurds, in order to force them assimilate as Turks. Turkish citizens were long discouraged or forbidden from discussing their unique geographical or cultural origins, and in time many lost familiarity with the languages their ancestors had spoken. Ironically, it was only when these efforts had succeeded in assimilating non-Kurdish groups that the government could switch tacks.

Today, many people in Turkey are increasingly proud of their family’s heritage, be it an ancestor who emigrated from the Caucasus a century ago or great-grandparents who grew up speaking Greek on Crete before the First World War. But this heritage is now understood as part of their Turkish identity, much as immigrant origins are a fundamental part of being American for many in the United States. In a sense, denying that minorities existed actually succeeded in making many of them go away. Or at least succeeded in recasting their identity in a more acceptable form. And as a result, the government can now wield these examples of successful assimilation against Kurds who want to preserve more of their cultural identity in everyday life than this model allows.

Ironically, the government’s new approach to managed multiculturalism is not as different as it might seem from the long-standing nationalist insistence that Kurds do not exist. Historically, denying diversity to ensure assimilation and recognizing diversity to demand assimilation have always been closely linked. Many of the men who founded the Turkish state in the 1920s were themselves recent immigrants from the Balkans or the Caucasus. And many of their early statements on Turkish identity acknowledge the diversity they themselves were part of. As the sociologist Mesut Yegen observed, shortly before the Republic’s founding [Ataturk himself declared](#):

The various Muslim elements living in the country... are genuine brothers who would respect each other’s ethnic, local, and moral norms... If one thing is certain, it is this: Kurds, Turks, Laz, Circassians, all these Muslim elements living within national borders have shared interests.

Quickly, though, an insistence on brotherhood and shared interests turned into an insistence on shared identity. As spelled out in the [introduction to Turkey’s 1924 Constitution](#):

Our state is a nation state. It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognize any nation other than Turks. There are other peoples which came from different races [ethnic groups] and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial [ethnic] status.

In short, Turkish leaders realized that constructing a nation paradoxically required them to deny there was any construction to be done. The promise of the constitution, then, was that everyone who was willing to do their part, play along and embrace their Turkish identity without ever admitting the hardship this might entail, would be accepted as a citizen in good standing. And so for decades, nationalists who refused to admit that anyone actually was Kurdish were still quick to point to individuals everyone knew were Kurdish who had been quite successful in modern Turkish society. Turgut Ozal, Turkey's president from 1989 to 1993, was half Kurdish, and the Kurdish pop star Ibrahim Tatlis, who rose to fame in the 1970s, remain perhaps the most popular examples. And there are, indeed, countless others, including high-ranking military officials, who have taken the state up on its promise of equal treatment for all those willing to quietly assimilate.

But the historical question elided by the government's current rhetoric remains: Why did some groups and individuals ultimately accept the identity offered them whereas others refused? From the beginning, Muslims seeking refuge after fleeing lost Ottoman territories in the Balkans—Albanians, Bosnians, and Pomaks from Bulgaria—were by nature of their circumstances more susceptible to the state's efforts to assimilate them. Even in the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman government made a point of [geographically dispersing such immigrants](#) and enforcing strict settlement quotas to help ensure that they would be absorbed by their new Turkish neighbors. In spite of this, the state sometimes [faced resistance](#) from these minorities as well. Circassians, who fled Russian advances in the Caucasus, even briefly sought to form their own independent state in Western Anatolia during the chaos that followed the First World War. Yet these were marginal efforts, and participants were quickly defeated and dispersed by the Turkish state.

The Kurds, by contrast, were a much larger population, were not fleeing their home territories, and were located in a region that had been free of centralized state control before the twentieth century. When the new Turkish state sought to impose its authority, identity, and secular ideology in the 1920s and 1930s, it [provoked a degree of resistance](#) in Eastern Anatolia that was absent elsewhere. When the state violently crushed this resistance, suppressing armed rebellions with the help of planes and possibly poison gas, then executing or exiling the leaders, it entrenched a vicious and enduring cycle of violence and revolt. In time, the state came to view Kurds as inherently rebellious. Laws that officially prohibited the use of any non-Turkish [language](#) or the expression of any non-Turkish identity, were enforced with particular severity against the Kurds. Many Kurds, in turn, came to associate the Turkish state, and even Turkishness itself, with the violent repression they had suffered. The government's current rhetoric falls short when it acknowledges the existence of Kurds but not the degree of violence they suffered.

Ironically, Kurdish politics in Turkey are undergoing a similarly radical but incomplete transformation, in which a long-standing commitment to Kurdish nationalism is competing with a new, more multicultural approach to identity. Among other sources of this transformation was PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's odd jailhouse encounter with the work of Benedict Anderson, a sociologist whose book *Imagined Communities* famously argues that nations are socially constructed. As Ocalan explained in an interview:

My realization that I was a positivist dogmatic was certainly connected to my isolation. In isolation I grasped the alternative modernity concept, that national structures can have many different models, that generally social structures are fictional ones created by human hands, and that nature is malleable. In particular, overcoming the model of the nation-state was very important for me. For a long time this concept was a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist principle for me. It essentially had the quality of an unchanging dogma. Because real socialism hadn't overcome the nation state model and saw it as a basic necessity for modernity, we weren't able to think of another form of nationalism, for example democratic nationalism. When you said nation there absolutely had to be a state! If Kurds were a nation they certainly needed a state! However as social conditions intensified, as I understood that nations themselves were the most meaningless reality, shaped under the influence of capitalism, and as I understood that the nation-state model was an iron cage for societies, I realized that freedom and community were more important concepts.

In June of 2015, the HDP, a party that in previous incarnations had long operated as the political wing of the PKK, achieved unprecedented success in Turkey's nationwide elections by rebranding itself as a liberal, democratic party that sought to represent all Turkish citizens in opposition to the AKP's growing authoritarianism. In its rhetoric, the party set aside appeals to Kurdish nationalism and instead presented an inclusive platform with a prominent place for less popular minorities like Christians and gypsies. By almost doubling the vote share traditionally achieved by Kurdish parties in previous elections, the HDP's success seemed to reveal the triumph of a new tone for resolving the Kurdish question.

After the June election, though, it quickly became clear how easily political and structural factors could sabotage whatever opening both sides' ideological transformations had created. Erdogan, for his part, appeared convinced that he could only

negotiate with the PKK effectively from a position of power. The HDP's political victory, coupled with the growing military success and international reputation of the PKK-linked Kurdish forces in Syria, created a climate in which he felt a peace deal was more likely to weaken his hand than strengthen it. Both the government and the PKK also appear to have concluded, not unjustifiably, that the other was taking advantage of negotiations to improve its position for the next round of fighting. The PKK worried the government was using the group's partial withdrawal to build new military bases, and the government accused the PKK of stockpiling weapons and planting explosives on roads around the region.

Thus after both sides gave up on negotiations renewed fighting broke out between the PKK and the Turkish government in the summer of 2015. Some nationalistic Turkish voters saw the violence as proof that Erdogan had been dangerously naïve, if not simply treasonous, when he started negotiations with the PKK in the first place. The violence also put the HDP in a politically untenable situation. The party called on both sides to end the fighting. But some of its newfound Turkish supporters were angry that it was not more critical of the PKK while many Kurds would have been angry if it had been. The result was that both sides drew closer to their traditional nationalistic bases and fell back into more mutually antagonistic positions.

In November 2015, after a summer of fighting, the AKP succeeded in overturning the results of the June election and returning to power as a single-party government. If some optimistically hoped Erdogan might be empowered to take unprecedented steps in pursuit of peace, it seems more likely that his government will once again be tempted to keep fighting for an unrealistic solution. Initial government statements suggested that the AKP was searching for something like a unilateral path to peace. That is, it hoped to find a solution in which it was not required to negotiate with either the PKK or the HDP, but perhaps instead with some third and as of yet undetermined Kurdish partner. As the elections revealed, the AKP continues to command the support of many conservatives Kurds, a fact that undoubtedly fuels the belief that it can somehow circumvent Kurdish nationalism altogether.

The AKP seems to be pursuing the same ambitious goal that animated early Turkish nationalists: winning Kurdish loyalty without compromising the vision of a strong centralized state and a cohesive national identity. Indeed, armed with religion and a greater willingness to accommodate Kurdish cultural demands—a combination Erdogan nicely embodied by waving a Kurdish translation of the Quran at a campaign stop—the AKP has tools that the early Kemalist state lacked. But, as the current fighting demonstrate, the AKP's vision also relies on a continued commitment to using force against those Kurds who don't accept the state's offer of inclusion on its own terms.

That the AKP's new multicultural language refuses to come to terms with Turkey's violent legacy of forced assimilation suggests the party fails to understand the resistance their current efforts will create. To bring peace and stability to Turkey, the state must respond to legitimate democratic demands for a more inclusive national identity and greater regional autonomy. This, unfortunately, requires the government to deal with the PKK, which for better and worse has come to embody these demands.

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