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OUR FUTURE SOUTHEASTERN TURKISH FRONTIERS

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Nathalie Tocci*

1. The people of southeast Turkey

Today's southeast Turkey has historically been the homeland of a large number of diverse ethnic groups. Nowadays, in many town and villages of the region the largest ethnic group is Kurdish. Turkish officials under Turgut Özal in the 1990s for the first time admitted there may be around 10 million Kurds living in Turkey. Other estimates indicate a Kurdish population of around 15 million. Adding to this figure the additional 10 million or so Kurds living in Iran, Iraq, Syria and the former Soviet Union, the Kurdish people represent the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own.

In Turkey's Kurdish areas the predominant Kurdish dialects are Kurmancý and Zaza. Kurdish, an Indo-European language, is totally distinct from Turkish and more closely connected to Persian. In the streets of Diyarbakýr, Panlýurfa or Mardin, Kurdish is the most commonly spoken language. Most people also speak Turkish, however, as it is the only language taught in schools. Education and broadcasting in the Kurdish language is still banned by the Turkish state.

While the Kurdish population is by far the largest ethnic group in the southeast, other peoples (excluding Turks themselves) inhabit (or inhabited) the area. Close to the Syrian border, in Mardin, Midiyat and Hasankeyf there is a considerable Arab population. A mixture of Kurdish and Arabic is often heard in towns and villages.

This region is also known for its Syriac population. The Syriacs are Christian Arabs, who historically inhabited the area straddling present-day Turkey and Syria. They hold that their

* *Note from the author:* In August 2000, members of the CEPS Task Force went on mission to the South Caucasus to visit the troubled borders and conflict areas in that region. This summer we travelled to the south east of Turkey, on the other side of the frontier (see map in the Annex). This policy brief contains our observations of the region that will become the EU's southeastern corner, following Turkey's accession. Nathalie Tocci is a Research Fellow at CEPS.

religion was founded during Jesus' lifetime and their language is closely linked to the ancient Aramaic, spoken in the region at the time of Christ himself. The Suryani Christian Orthodox Patriarchate used to be in Mardin and then close by in the Deyr-az Zaferan Monastery, but was moved to Damascus in the 1920s. Despite being the historic homeland of the Syriacs, these people now represent a small minority in the area. Many Suryani Christians were persecuted by Turks and Kurds during the first World War, when they were known to be sympathetic to Allied plans to dismember the Ottoman Empire.

Another important ethnic group, now almost absent, but up until one hundred years ago representing one of the largest populations in the region, are the Armenians. Problems between the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian population visibly began in the 19th century, when inspired by the rebellions of the Christian populations of the Balkans, Armenian nationalist ambitions emerged. These movements were strongly encouraged by the Russians, keen to see the collapse of the Empire. The tensions came to the crux during and immediately after World War I. In 1915 the local Armenians, aided by the Russians, took the opportunity to strive for the establishment of a separate state. The local Turks and Kurds retaliated, leading to the death of between 700,000 and 1 million Armenians. By 1918 hardly any Armenians were left in the area.

A reminder of the tragic events of 1915 is the old city of Van, on the eastern shores of the lake. The old city of Van, with its 80,000 or so inhabitants, used to host a predominantly Armenian population. In 1915, the people, barricaded into the old town, were killed by the heavy artillery of the Turkish garrison, fired from the Rock of Van above. The town was pulverised, leaving intact only three mosques. Old Van was left untouched thereafter. The new city, built during the Russian occupation of the area after 1915, was developed a few kilometres inland from the lakeshore. The only remains of old Van are a sea of overgrown, rubble-strewn mounds. The complete abandonment of this area and the lack of any reference to its history, render the tragedies of the past all the more vivid.

The remains of Old Van



Other tragedies which took place in the region are instead fully documented. In new Van's museum there are extensive references to the massacres committed by the Armenians and the Russians towards the Muslim population during the brief period of Russian occupation during the 1st World War. Following the events of early 1915, the Russian army succeeded in occupying the area in May. In retaliation for the Armenian massacres earlier that year and aiming to cleanse the area of its Muslim population, the Russians and Armenians forced the Muslims to leave. In the process Turkey estimates that around 600,000 Muslims died.

Evidence of the Armenian past in the area is not confined to Van. In Diyarbakır, there used to be over 250,000 Armenians. Today there are not more than a few Armenian families in the city. We managed to find one of them. An old Armenian man, well over ninety years of age has appointed himself as the guardian of what was in the past a beautiful Armenian church in the heart of the old city. The church is half destroyed and abandoned. There is no official tourist information indicating its whereabouts. It can only be accessed through a small door off one of the dark and narrow alleyways of the city. Next to the church is the old man's home and a tiny chapel, still in use by the few remaining Armenian families in the city.

The area around Van and Kars is particularly rich in old Armenian remains. No doubt the most important of these is the old capital of Ani, a few kilometres from Kars. However the remains in Ani, as well as the other remaining Armenian churches in the region, are being left to disintegrate over time. For the Turkish government, faced with the mounting genocide allegations and the Armenian hints of possible forthcoming demands for territorial compensation, it is important to erase signs of Armenia's past rule in the area. Armenians often claim that many buildings are being destroyed by Turkish officials. The truth of these allegations is debatable. But what cannot be denied is that all Armenian monuments in the region, as well as the old Georgian churches further north in the Kaçkar mountain range, are either ignored or left to perish or have been 'Islamicised'. The Turkish government may not have sufficient resources to adequately restore many Christian remains. Yet it could be expected to look after them in the same way as it treats its cultural heritage in the west of the country.

2. Human rights and the Southeast

The violation of human rights of the peoples of the southeast, and in particular of the Kurdish population, creates persisting discontent in the region. Despite the formal end of the war against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 1999 with the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan, Kurds generally continue to resent the Turkish state. In general there is little conflict between local Kurds and Turks. The Kurdish question concerns human rights and freedoms. Essentially it is not an ethnic conflict between Kurds and Turks. Today, Kurdish resentment against Turkish people can exist due to the high socio-economic inequalities between them. But this is a product of state policies, which have led to considerably higher standards of living in the Turkish-populated western part of the country.

At every opportunity, out of earshot of the Turkish soldiers, the local population voices its complaints against the state. They protest against the repression of their language rights with the persisting ban on Kurdish education and broadcasting. They resent the neglect of their cultural heritage and the Turkification of place names and monuments in the region. They bitterly complain about the repression of their political rights, with the only legal although constantly monitored party standing for the Kurdish people (People's Democracy Party HADEP) being restrained by its inability to overcome the 10% threshold in Parliament. They object to the heavy militarisation in the region. Currently six provinces of the southeast,

namely Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli and Van, are still under state of emergency rule.

Constitutional reforms concerning human rights, and the situation of the Kurdish population in particular, are urgently needed. The package of reforms proposed prior to the summer recess included Kurdish education and broadcasting. To a large extent, due to the economic and political turmoil in the country in the last ten months, human rights reforms have been slow to come. Parliament was due to discuss the wide-ranging constitutional changes in September. This would indeed be an essential step both to spearhead the process of political liberalisation in the country and to boost Turkey-EU ties. In just over two months time, the European Commission will publish its fourth report on Turkey's progress towards accession.

Yet some political parties, and the National Security Council (MGK), dominated by the military, have recently declared that the reforms should be allowed to 'mature' before their debate in parliament. Given that many of the proposed reforms were set out as medium-term priorities in the EU's Accession Partnership Document for Turkey and that accession negotiations are unlikely to begin before 2005, the political and military establishment feels under little pressure to push the reforms along. There is also little consensus on the substance of the reforms, with the right-wing nationalist MHP remaining vehemently opposed to Kurdish broadcasting and education as well as the lifting of the death penalty.

But a sense of urgency should exist in Ankara, both because of the current Turkish realities and because of the need to move Turkish-EU relations ahead. Particularly in the undeveloped east of the country, the majority (both Turkish and Kurdish) of the population feels frustrated and disillusioned with the current system: the persisting state of emergency rules, the restrictions on the use of Kurdish and the lack of adequate political representation. A sense of urgency should also be felt concerning Turkish-EU relations. The ball is now in Turkey's court. It is up to the Turkish authorities to proceed swiftly with the necessary radical reforms necessary to begin accession negotiations in the next three or four years and accede to the Union a decade or so later.

3. The economic situation in the Southeast

Most of all, the people complain about their economic situation and the decades of state neglect towards their region. The economic situation worsened significantly during the 1980s and 1990s, mainly because of the consequences of the struggle against the PKK. The

undeclared war between the Turkish state and the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party between 1984 and 1999 caused significant socio-economic strain in the region. Many villages were depopulated causing a flood of landless and jobless people into the already economically backward cities of the southeast. Over 1.5 million people were forcibly displaced during this period. The situation in Diyarbakır is one of the most vivid examples of the economic troubles of the area. The unnatural swelling of the city during the past decade appears to be an unsustainable socio-economic strain. The general backwardness of the area, the flow of migrants from the countryside and the rapid natural demographic growth (with average family sizes of 10 or 12) make Diyarbakır amongst the poorest cities in Turkey. Unemployment rates range around 40% and class sizes in schools often exceed 100.

The Turkish government has for years acknowledged the close link between the economic and political realities on the ground. The \$32 billion GAP (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi) project has been portrayed as the panacea for all the economic and political troubles of the southeast. The southeast Anatolian project began in 1974 with the construction of a first dam on the upper Euphrates River. The entire project includes the construction of 22 dams in the region. It is believed that the economic gains deriving from the GAP will be sufficient to trigger growth and development in the southeast and eradicate poverty, which in turn is considered to be the main fuel for Kurdish separatism. Indeed, the results of the still-incomplete project are impressive. The development of an adequate system of irrigation is imperative and the GAP has already begun irrigating 1.6 million hectares of previously partial wasteland. Agriculture is one of the principal potential resources of the region and has been neglected for too long by Ankara. The completion of the project could see the nation's cotton, pistachio and wheat production double. Most of the dams will also generate electric power. This together with considerable tax incentives has already generated considerable industrialisation in the region to the west of the basin.

Nevertheless, the GAP alone is insufficient to eradicate poverty in the region. The GAP will only add to the prosperity of the southeast if complemented with adequate micro-credit schemes and resettlement projects to allow the local population to benefit from the project and reverse the persisting migration flows to western Turkey and Europe. So far the dams have predominantly benefited large land owners, able to qualify for state credits to purchase the necessary fertiliser and equipment for agriculture. Many small farmers and ordinary villagers near the fertile river sides are instead being displaced from their farms and homes, which are often being submerged by the rising waters. This has exacerbated the trend of internal

migration in Turkey, where a large proportion of the southeastern population has been forced to migrate to the *gecekondu* (shanty towns) of western Turkey seeking new jobs. The governments in the 1980s and 1990s did not discourage these movements, as rural depopulation was viewed as an effective instrument against the PKK insurrection. PKK fighters were known to take refuge and support from the rural and often isolated peoples of the southeast.

The GAP also threatens the area's cultural heritage. Several archaeological sites along the banks of the Euphrates have been flooded. With the construction of the next stage of the dam along the Tigris River (for which British funding had apparently been secured but has not yet been deployed), the magnificent medieval settlement of Hasankeyf is also doomed to disappear under water (see photo below).

This leads us to the discussion of tourism in the southeast. While agricultural development is a clear priority, the economic future of the region would be considerably brighter if adequate attention was paid to its tourism.

Throughout the centuries, eastern Turkey has seen an unending succession of civilisations, kingdoms and empires, leaving behind the most spectacular remains amidst breath-taking natural settings. Yet little is done to encourage the development of tourism in this region. Accommodation is generally poor, tourist information centres are rare, the area remains heavily militarised with six districts still under state-of-emergency rule, and the preservation of architecture is virtually non-existent. In the streets of Diyarbakır or Mardin, the odd tourist searching for a mosque or church must rely upon the directions and impromptu explanation in Turkish of a young teenager. The most beautiful Armenian and Georgian churches around Van and Kars are being used as barns or covered football pitches for the village boys. With the passing of time these monuments will gradually disappear. So the overwhelming majority of tourists visiting Turkey each year choose to stay in the west of the country, rarely venturing further east than Cappadocia and the eastern Mediterranean coast. A concerted government effort to make the most of the cultural heritage and natural beauty of this region is necessary.

The medieval Kurdish settlement of Hasankeyf will disappear with the construction of the Ilisu dam on the Tigris.



4. Turkey's troubled borders

Turkey's relations with its neighbouring countries are far from unproblematic. Out of the eight countries that are territorially contiguous to Turkey, the Republic can only claim to enjoy smooth relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan. The region's tormented history, its complex ethnic and religious make-up and its unfavourable economic conditions lie at the heart of these outstanding problems. The legacy of the past and the persisting tensions also explain the Turkish establishment's attachment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its Republic.

Let us focus on two difficult borders: the Syrian and the Armenian borders. Turkish-Syrian relations have progressed beyond their lowest point in 1998 when the two countries were

effectively on the brink of war. Yet one of the major sources of contention is still present and could spark a crisis in years to come. This is the GAP project itself. Since the completion of the great Atatürk dam, Syria's water share from the Euphrates has been cut by half. The project to complete the Ilisu project would further reduce the flow of water to Turkey's southern neighbour. This triggered Syria's retaliatory support for the PKK struggle in the 1990s, causing a near war between Syria and Turkey in 1998 when Turkey forced Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Secret diplomatic relations between the two countries are known to have worked towards an increase of Syria's water share back to 1000m³ per second, in return for an end to Syria's covert support for Kurdish separatism. With the capture of Öcalan, relations have improved. But the pending Ilisu dam on the Tigris may well cause renewed troubles in the near future.

No doubt the most sensitive of all of Turkey's borders is the one with Armenia. The entire perimeter of the border is marked by an outer and inner zone. The outer zone is a five-kilometre area within Turkey along the Armenian border. Within this area photography is not allowed (hence photographs are prohibited in the site of Ani) and access requires an official permit. The region stretching from Digor to Tuzluca, along the highway, is a no-go area after dark even for the local population. The road is littered with military roadblocks. Mount Ararat (Ađrý) lies within the outer zone. It became off limits in the 1990s due to PKK concentrations on its foothills. It is surrounded by fully equipped military bases. Access is possible but requires an application to the Turkish embassy three months in advance. The last 500 metres before the border are the 'inner zone'. Here any presence is strictly prohibited.

The Turkish blockade of Armenia has damaged Turkish interests. It has increased the siege mentality in Armenia causing huge resentment there. Armenians cannot cross the border and visit the Armenian remains in eastern Turkey. They can only content themselves by gazing at the sacred Mount Ararat from Yerevan on clear days. This has radicalised the attitudes of Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora, who have successfully lobbied for renewed discussions in the US, France, Italy and European Parliament on the 1915 Armenian 'genocide'. The blockade has harmed Turkey's reputation abroad and reduced European sympathy towards Turkey's EU candidacy. It has done so without effectively helping Azerbaijan to regain control over Nagorno Karabakh and the surrounding occupied territories. Finally, it has harmed both countries' economic interests, while being unable to prevent trade between the two nations through third countries such as Georgia or Iran. Turkish businessmen have frequently signalled their eagerness to legally trade with their Armenian neighbours. A

Turkish-Armenian Business Council exists, aiming to foster business relations between the two nations and eagerly awaiting the opening of frontier.

Mount Ararat and military base



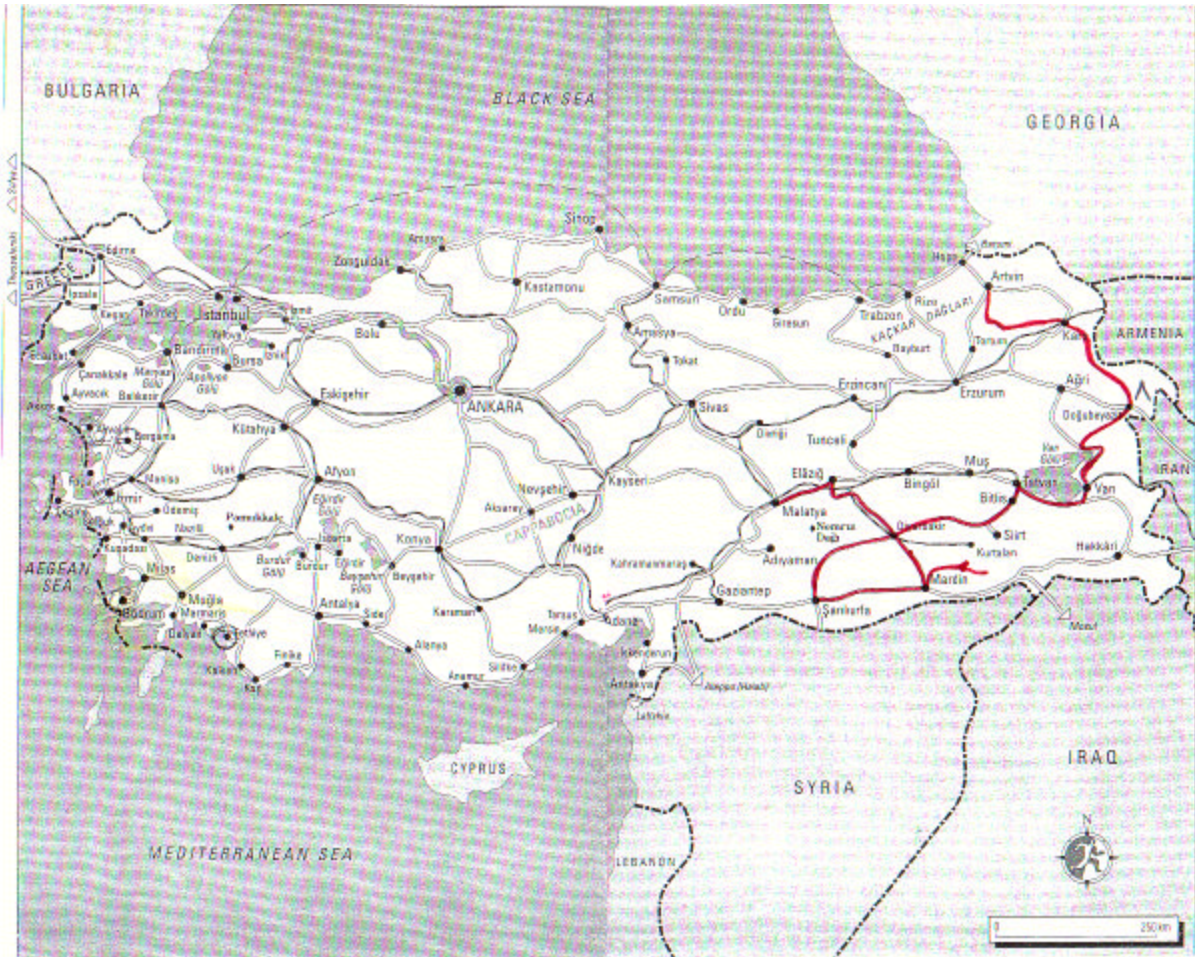
5. Policy Recommendations

The opening of the frontier should be an important priority for Turkey immediately after a breakthrough in the Armenian-Azeri negotiations over Nagorno Karabakh. It would allow an establishment of economic and cultural ties between the two countries. This would not simply benefit Turkey and Armenia economically but it would also build trust and understanding between the two peoples. The increased contact between the two, and the the hugely facilitated access by Armenian citizens to Mount Ararat and Armenian monuments and churches in eastern Turkey, would ease the siege mentality of the latter. Turks and Armenians might then embark upon a more fruitful dialogue on the past. Turkey could also then play the constructive and cooperative role in the Caucasus to which it aspires. The Turkish propositions for stability and cooperation in the Caucasus hinge upon a normalisation of Turkey's relations with Armenia. Finally, Turkey's relation with the EU would be boosted. An implicit requirement of the EU towards its applicants as set out in its *Agenda 2000* is the resolution of any pending territorial disputes with other EU members or neighbouring non-

members either through negotiation or through arbitration in the International Court of Justice.

The problems afflicting Turkey's southeastern regions and borders are critical to the country's candidacy to EU membership. The incentive of EU membership alone cannot solve Turkey's social, political and economic problems. Reform needs to be generated internally and spurred by a new political class. Yet the anchor of EU candidacy can be a useful additional incentive to motivate the necessary internal political and economic reforms in the country. It is thus important for the EU to concentrate on these problems and work together with Turkish officials towards the gradual integration of the whole of the country, and not only the more prosperous and 'Europeanised' northwestern Turkey into the Union.

Annex: Journey to Southeast Turkey



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