



OBSERVATOIRE DE LA TURQUIE ET DE SON ENVIRONNEMENT GÉOPOLITIQUE

TURKEY'S TURKISH IDENTITY QUESTION

BY Prof. Dr. DOĞU ERGIL

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The seeds of the “Turkish question” were sown in the process of nation-building that the leadership adopted with a view to construct a nation-state from the remnants of the Ottoman empire. This was a leadership that had seen the empire slip through its fingers and vanish in the misty recesses of history.

This leadership opted, in a nutshell, for a “**small nation**” concept on the basis of the ethnic lineage and faith identity of a group (the majority) of its citizens rather than a “**great nation**” that would include all those living on the political geography called the “fatherland”. In other words, this was an attempt to create a nation on the basis not of what *is*, but what *ought to be*. The state itself was conceived and later functioned as an apparatus of domination of the nation that ought to be (of the “Turk”).

The attitude of the state to those “other” citizens was either to get rid of them (i.e. send them abroad), to transform them (i.e. assimilation), or to marginalise them in order to subject them to surveillance. These choices led to establishing an authoritarian centralism based on the domination of the majority rather than a voluntary political union of the different groups (of varying ethnic and cultural affiliation) living in the country. However, this domination at times took the shape of a setup that required recourse to coercion rather than being based on a peaceful form of unity. The logic of the policy pursued as reflected in the official discourse makes the situation indisputably clear:

On 16 March 1923, at a tea party organised by the Small Merchants' Association of the Adana Turkish Hearth (*Türk Ocağı*), Mustafa Kemal addressed the small merchants of Adana:

“The other elements dominated our Adana, this or that element, the Armenians for instance, occupied our craft centres and put themselves in the position of owning this country. There can certainly be no greater injustice and arrogance. The Armenians have no rights over this fertile

land. This country belongs to you, it is the land of Turks. This country was, historically speaking, Turkish; hence it is Turkish and will forever remain Turkish.”¹

Thus the highest authority declared that the Republic would not pursue a policy of **political unity** based on the complex population structure of the Ottoman state, but a monist policy based on ethnic or racial similarity. The evidence for this policy was in the making.

In June 1923, Jewish, Greek, and Armenian civil servants were dismissed and replaced by Muslims. Freedom of movement was restricted for non-Muslims throughout Anatolia. The decision was taken so hastily that many people were not able to return to their hometown and remained stranded wherever they had travelled. To make matters worse, the migration of Jewish citizens to Palestine was prohibited.

In September 1923, a decree banned the return to their homes of Armenians who had emigrated from Cilicia (the region around Adana) and from Eastern Anatolia.

In December 1923, a community of Jews living in Çorlu, Thrace, were ordered to leave the city within 48 hours. The decision was put off as a result of the plea of the Chief Rabbinate, but a similar decision was taken for Çatalca and immediately enforced.

The Pharmacists Law of 24 January 1924 made opening a pharmacy a prerogative for “Turks”. In pursue of the Attorneys Law adopted on 3 April 1924, 960 attorneys were assessed for “good morals” and 460 were disbarred. Hence 57 per cent of Jewish lawyers were deprived of their profession, as well as three Greeks and Armenians out of four.

¹ Atatürk's Speech and Statements (Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri), Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayını, 2006, s. 519-521.)

In the wake of the adoption of the Civil Code on 17 February 1926, the Armenian, Jewish, and Greek communities were successively forced to declare that they would forgo the exercise of minority rights granted to them by the Lausanne Peace Treaty.

On 1 August 1926, it was declared that the government was entitled to confiscate all properties appropriated by non-Muslims before 23 August 1924, the date when the Lausanne Peace Treaty had come into force.

On 13 January 1928, as a result of a decision made by a group of students of Darülfünun (Istanbul University) Faculty of Law for purposes of currying favour with the regime, signs were posted in means of public transportation such as ferries and trams reading "Citizen, speak Turkish!". From then on, many non-Muslims were prosecuted for "defamation of Turkness" on the grounds that they did not comply with the requirements of the campaign. The fact that such court cases are still filed demonstrates that the official definition of the Turkish identity has difficulty in making itself accepted.

The Law on the Method of Practice of the Medical Profession and its Disciplines, promulgated on 11 April 1928, stipulated that "being a Turk" was required in order to practice the medical profession. Thus non-Muslims were also barred from the medical profession.

Within 18 months in the years 1929 and 1930, 6,373 Armenians of Turkey were forced to migrate to Syria.

On 18 September 1930, Mahmut Esad Bozkurt, then Minister of Justice, enunciated his renowned aphorism: "It is my opinion, my belief that this country in its inner self is Turkish. Whoever is not authentically Turkish has only one single right in the land of Turks and that is to be a servant, a slave."²

² The source for the chronology: Ayşe Hür, "Tarih Defteri", *Taraf*, 22.01.2012.

This kind of practice was to be seen in the following years as well. For instance, the assassination of Hrant Dink in Istanbul and of three Christians (Tilman Ekkehart Geske, Necati Aydın, and Uğur Yüksel), accused of conducting missionary activities (no such offence is defined in the legislation) were neither isolated cases, nor were they the product of the brutality of a handful of rogue elements. As the investigation revealed, it is undeniable that there were not only official connections but a mass psychology approving these murders as well.

As in the case of Mahmut Esad Bozkurt, if a Minister of Justice of a country expresses official policy in such a discriminatory language, if he reduces the state, the citizen (and the nation) he represents to a specific ethnic group and a specific faith, then it was unthinkable that a style of politics in contradiction with the plural reality of the country should not inevitably arise. In short, the emergence of the “Turkish question” took place in the early republican period and, having gone through diverse stages, has remained alive up to now.

TWO SPHERES OF IDENTITY

The choice of creating a nation through Turkification (and giving priority to Sunni Islam) flung those who are not members of this ethnic lineage and this faith outside the nation and deprived them of citizens' rights. Non-Muslims overwhelmingly felt the need to leave the country, and those remained were kept under constant pressure and surveillance. Muslims who are not Sunni or Turkish, such as the Alawis and the Kurds, were tolerated because they possessed merely a half of the official identity and they have always been subjected to restrictions regarding the recognition of their respective identities and the acceptance of their cultural rights.

In this style of politics, two different spheres of identity were formed: 1. **The official identity.** Being Turkish and Sunni (and preferably belonging to the Hanafi school of the Sunni denomination). 2. **Unofficial identity.**

The official identity is something the state offers its citizen, through which the citizen is entitled to rights. It is monistic and excludes other identities. It is thus authoritarian and exclusive. The sphere of unofficial identity is a space open to cultural pluralism and conducive to cohabitation, where democracy can flourish. The two spheres of identity—i.e. the political and the cultural spheres—have always clashed and resulted in the formation of profound fault lines in the country. That an identity politically adopted and cultivated has assumed a function so deeply in contradiction to its aim is a misfortune for Turkey. The existence of endless frictions along the breaches secular vs. religious, Alawi vs. Sunni, Muslim vs. non-Muslim, Turkish vs. Kurdish, majority vs. minority, and the cross-border nature of some of these, e.g. the frictions with the Kurds and the Armenians, has ceaselessly exhausted Turkey's energy and had adverse effects on its foreign relations.

THE "OTHERS" AND THREE OBJECTIONS

There is another noteworthy aspect concerning the relations between identities: each empire leaves enclaves of populations behind it as it ebbs and withdraws. In effect, many enclaves of populations that used to live in the Balkans or the Middle East or the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus that fled Russian oppression in the 19th century, once having taken refuge in Turkey, adopted the choice offered to them by their new host country and became subject to Turkification. The autochthonous populations chose to sustain their previous identities for the simple reason that they were already a part of this country. That is why the history of the Turkish republic has at the same time been a history of a conflict between the Turk and the Kurd. The Kurds may be said to have made the first objection to the narrow conception of the republic regarding the definition of the nation.

The faith identity, Islam, which was silently but officially condoned alongside the Turkish identity offered by the state and celebrated aloud, was able to penetrate the public sphere on

one condition: in a transparent form or, in other words, invisibly. This state of things continued as long as the founding bureaucracy and its ideological successors ruled over the state apparatus.

The restrictions imposed by the state on cultural pluralism, political participation, freedom of expression, and individual enterprise in the name of “state security” (it is of utmost significance that the courts charged with overseeing these areas are dubbed not “National Security” but “State Security Courts”) slowed down the development of the nation and the democratisation of the regime. It forced the state to spend all its energy on bringing under control the “others”, forever converted into enemies and characterised as a source of threat.

The second objection to this kind of conception of the nation kept under absolute discipline (and custody) came from the left. However, since civil society, trade unions and industry was not advanced, organised working class was limited; hence the left could not set up a democratic front to break up the hegemony of the state.

The third objection came from the so-called “National Viewpoint” (Millî Görüş). The concept “national” here stood for a traditionalist perspective of society which, as against the conception of the citizen the state wished to impose on the whole society, i.e.. a citizen who is Turkish, Muslim, secular, nationalist, westernised, and obedient to his state, was based on an identity that rejected being a westernised, was religious, questioned secularism as a state religion, and countered a conception of the state that was aloof to its citizens. According to the partisans of this viewpoint, there was a nation, but this nation was different from the one the state described and pretended was the nation. It had a history, a culture and a spirit (*Geist*) of its own. One only had to peel away the thick skin of the state and unchain these. This current, beginning with the National Order Party (Millî Nizam Partisi) and progressively passing through the National Salvation Party (Millî Selamet Partisi), the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi), the Bliss Party (Saadet Partisi), and the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), revised the thesis of the “Turkish nation”. The specific weight of

Turkishness and Islam changed and a “pious” conception of the nation became prominent. This conception had no problem with Turkness. But the Turk had to be Muslim. And the Muslim had to be devout...

AN INCREASING SOCIAL DISTANCE

Outside the element of westernised and the fading (statist) secularism, the elements of Turkness, Islam, nationalism and obedience to the state sustain their presence and weight as components of the new formation of the official identity. Within this framework, the door is more open to other ethnic lineage groups as long as they are Muslim, but not to non-Muslims. There is no shift in the emphasis of nationalism on the ethnic origin of Turk. This is in contradiction with, for instance, Kurdish nationalism. There is no let up in the exigency of “absolute deference to the state”, regardless with the character of the government in power.

What, then, has changed? New social categories, which today are most clearly represented by the Justice and Development Party, have come to power through legitimate, i.e. electoral channels, and wrested the state away from the unaccountable, unquestionable bureaucracy. Even this is an important feat because it will make possible for other group so far excluded to make their presence felt (and recognised) in the cultural sphere and to fight for their rights. This process may be labelled “the return to the public sphere”. To the extent that this becomes a reality the quest for identities and the fight for rights can be conducted pacifically.

We have seen the first few hints of this process. A rereading of history from a different point of view regarding the Armenian question, the handling of policies concerning the minorities with a critical outlook, the conversion of the Kurdish rebellion from that of armed groups into a civil society movement with broad civic initiative developing on the Turkish as well as, or even more, on the Kurdish side raise the prospect of unofficial politics to generate solutions through methods of its own.

This does not come easily or painlessly, though. The more Kurdish civil society intervenes in the Kurdish question, the more Turkish civil society responds with a defensive reflex rather than viewing it with a sigh of relief that recognizes that “an interlocutor that can be negotiated with is emerging”. That is because the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan (PKK) leading the Kurdish political movement uses violence as its fundamental political instrument. As violence assumed over time a function of sharing power or carving out a sphere of power for oneself, beyond fighting for one’s rights, a deepening rift was born between the Turk and the Kurd. As the Kurds started to respond with violence to the policy of denial, repression, and violence of so many decades, the Turks felt that their own original identity, identical twins with the official one, and their dominant status came under threat. In short, today we are facing another aspect of the “Turkish question”. For the first time ever, the Turks feel victimised. As every group that derives its justification from victimisation and deprivation, they deem all methods to be used in their own defence reasonable and legitimate. Between the two groups a **social distance** is opening up.

INDICATIONS OF TWO STUDIES

Data from two studies on this issue are available to us. According to the “Report on Social Perceptions in the Struggle against Terrorism” prepared by the Wise Man Strategic Centre (BILGESAM), the level of the desire expressed by the Turks and the Kurds on “cohabitation” (i.e. becoming relatives or neighbours) shows how far the estrangement of the Turks from the Kurds has advanced, whereas in the past their reaction to the Kurds was confined to discrimination. The ratio of Turks who wish to live together with the Kurds is 24 percent, while the converse ratio for the Kurds is 78 percent.³

³ BILGESAM Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi, www.bilgesam.com/tr/index.php?option=com_content&view

Another indication may be found in chapter four of the study titled “Research on the Political Situation in Turkey”, conducted by the social research establishment Metropoll in September 2012. 67 percent of the people approve of the prospect of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) being shut down. Those who would like to see the immunity of the members of parliament belonging to this party reaches 77 percent.⁴

The decoupling expressed by these figures demonstrates that Turkish nationalism and its illegitimate child Kurdish nationalism, by fanning each other reciprocally, have reached a stage where they are sabotaging the “great nation” project. This is a result of the choice made in favour of the “small nation” and these conflictual ideologies make establishing a political nation/union in Turkey that comprehends both the Turks and the Kurds (and, of course, all the other ethnic and cultural groups) quite difficult.

FROM DISCRIMINATION TO DISPERSION

A unifying factor that could have prevented this decoupling could have been Turkey's accession to the EU. In effect, the Kurds have always been keener on EU membership than the Turks. The belief that membership will alleviate violations of human rights and boost democratic rights may be said to be a factor that puts a brake on Kurdish separatism. But the reluctance of the state and political leaders to act swiftly and to carry out the requisite democratic and legal reforms has created disillusionment among the Kurds and prepared the ground for radical (power-seeking) Kurdish demands.

If one of the factors that pose a challenge to national unity in Turkey is the official minorities policy, a second one is the incapacity to provide a political and legal solution to the Kurdish

⁴ <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/category/show/8>

objection, which then has grown into a violent struggle. It is this that has converted the Kurdish question and the Turkish question into processes mutually feeding upon each other.

Another significant factor is the fragmentation of Turkish identity, its decomposition into sectarian and ideological (political) communities and its dispersion. The formation of spheres of micro-identities such as the secular vs. the pious, the Sunni vs. the Alawi, the classical nationalist vs. the neo-nationalist, the traditionalist vs. the modern has atomised the Turkish identity and made it more difficult than ever to establish a shared national identity or a politically shared space. Even the national holiday commemorating the foundation of the republic, the Republic Day, is now being celebrated in different forms and with differing content by different groups of Turks. People wave the national flag at each other like a weapon, trying to prove that they are the more “authentic” Turks.

Whereas the aim was to create a single comprehensive Turkish political/national identity, the method of nation building adopted led not only to the exclusion of the non-Turk; it also divided the Turks among themselves. The members of the nation have come to distrust each other. According to the findings of the study “Atlas of Values for Turkey 2012” conducted by Professor Yılmaz Esmer, who teaches at Bahçeşehir University, 90 percent of the people of Turkey do not trust their fellow citizens.⁵

So this is where the Turkish question has arrived. The Turkish identity, erected in opposition to the non-Turk, has now been converted into a division between “different Turks”. This derives from its non-embracing character.

⁵ http://www.bahcesehir.edu.tr/etkinlik/turkiye_degerler_atlasi_2012

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