

THE KURDS IN TURKEY

A Political Dilemma

Michael M. Gunter



Westview Special Studies on the Middle East

The Kurds in Turkey

A Political Dilemma

Michael M. Gunter

Westview Press

BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

Westview Special Studies on the Middle East

This Westview softcover edition is printed on acid-free paper and bound in library-quality, coated covers that carry the highest rating of the National Association of State Textbook Administrators, in consultation with the Association of American Publishers and the Book Manufacturers' Institute.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Copyright © 1990 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published in 1990 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gunter, Michael M.

The Kurds in Turkey: a political dilemma / Michael M.

Gunter

p. cm. — (Westview special studies on the Middle East)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-8120-7

1. Kurds—Turkey, Eastern—Politics and government. 2. Kurds—Civil rights—Turkey, Eastern. 3. Turkey—Politics and government—1960–1980. 4. Turkey—Politics and government—1980–. 5. Turkey, Eastern—Ethnic relations. I. Title. II. Series.

DS51.E27G86 1990

323.1'191590561—dc20

90-42499

CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Non-Instructional Faculty Assignment Committee at Tennessee Technological University for giving me a semester of released time during which I was able to write much of this book. Angelo Volpe, the President of Tennessee Tech, encouraged and supported me, for which I am very grateful. Robert Bode, Steve Khleif, and Paul Stephenson gave me a considerable amount of help in the mechanics of word processing, while Sanford Silverburg and Steve Tabachnick have been sources of academic encouragement for many years. In writing this book I also have had the benefit of advice from Michael Turner, Heath Lowry, Vera Beaudin Saeedpour, Siyamend Othman, Jennifer Noyon, Paul Henze, and Mehmet Ali Birand, as well as others who have preferred to remain anonymous.

My year spent as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer in International Relations at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, first sensitized me to the issues I have analyzed here. The Fulbright Program was a marvelous broadening experience for me. I hope such academic exchanges will always be supported, for they pay such rich dividends in international understanding and peace.

I thank *The Middle East Journal* and *Conflict Quarterly* for giving me permission to use material that appeared in earlier articles I published in them. Special thanks go to Michael S. Miller for permission to use the excellent map he drew of the Kurdish minority in Turkey. Finally, I would like to mention that I omitted the diacritical marks in foreign words to simplify the text; the meanings of the words have not been affected.

Michael M. Gunter

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 Background	5
2 Prelude to Conflict	11
3 Political Instability and Terrorism in the 1970 s	23
4 Suppression	43
5 Birth of the PKK and Other Kurdish Parties	57
6 Revival of the PKK	71
7 Transnational Influences	97
8 Conclusion	123
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	129
<i>Index</i>	141

Introduction

The Kurds are a Sunni Muslim, Indo-European-speaking people whose traditional homeland is concentrated in the rugged, mountainous area of the Middle East where Turkey, Iraq, and Iran converge. Much smaller numbers also inhabit Syria and the Soviet Union, while a diaspora has now spread to several other Mideastern states as well as western Europe and North America. Although they constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, the Kurds lack their own independent state. As such, they are one of the largest ethnic groups in the world thus situated.

A number of useful studies of the Kurds exist.¹ Very few, however, deal specifically with those living in Turkey.² This dearth of analysis is ironic since approximately half of the Kurds in the world live in Turkey. What is more, in the past few years a long-festered disaffection for the Turkish state on the part of some of them has developed into a small, but sustained guerrilla war in southeastern Anatolia. Commenting on what it termed the "persistence of Kurdish separatism" in eastern Turkey, an assessment by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stated:

The Kurds' sense of separate identity has not been significantly reduced by the [Turkish] government's attempts to co-opt or suppress them. The Kurdish language has flourished, and clandestinely published Kurdish literature is surreptitiously obtainable in Kurdish areas. . . . In the past several years, several overt "cultural associations" and covert liberation groups have formed to promote the idea of Kurdish autonomy and independence.³

In an editorial entitled "Something's going on in east Turkey," the chairman and founder of the *Turkish Daily News*, İlhan Cevik, added:

There is no doubt left now that the situation in the region is extremely serious. The Turkish armed forces units there are in a state of permanent alert and security operations are going on round the clock. According to official statements bands of separatist terrorists are being harbored and trained in some neighboring countries. The insurgents are involved in all manner of activities in the region and despite the extensive security measures they are still very active. . . . As a matter of fact they regularly raid military patrols, gendarmerie stations and even prisons.⁴

The purpose of this study is to analyze the current Kurdish problem in Turkey from the point of view of the Turkish authorities and their supporters, as well as from the perspective of disaffected Kurds living in that state and abroad. Analyzed specifically will be the historical background to this situation, the political instability and terrorism rampant in Turkey during the late 1970s, the legal suppression of the Kurds, the emergence of numerous Kurdish political parties in the 1970s of which the *Partia Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK) or Kurdish Workers Party has been the most noteworthy, the current activities of the PKK, and transnational influences on the situation. Finally, some tentative conclusions will be offered. My hope is to throw some objective light on a troubling problem that has been poorly understood.

Notes

1. For two excellent examples, see Thomas Bois and Vladimir Minorsky, "Kurds, Kurdistan," *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (new edition), V, 1981, 438-486; and M. M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan* (Utrecht, The Netherlands: University of Utrecht, 1978). In addition, see such recent studies as David McDowall, *The Kurds*, Report No. 23 (London: Minority Rights Group Ltd., 1985); Anthony Hyman, *Elusive Kurdistan: The Struggle for Recognition*, No. 214 (London: The Centre for Security and Conflict Studies, 1988); and Charles G. MacDonald, "The Kurdish Question in the 1980s," in *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East*, ed. by Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 233-252.

2. I am aware of two excellent exceptions in English to this general statement. See Kendal [Nezan], "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1980), pp. 47-106; and Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds in Turkey," *MERIP Reports*, No. 121 (Feb. 1984), pp. 6-12.

3. National Foreign Assessment Center (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency), *The Kurdish Problem in Perspective* (Aug. 1979). The research for this study was done by analysts from the Office of Political Analysis and the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research, and coordinated within the CIA. Although it was stamped "secret," it was seized during the occupation of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran during 1979. In citing from it, I am simply conveying information that is now in the public domain. In no way, do I condone the method by which it became thus available. Throughout my ensuing text, I refer to this analysis as the "CIA Report."

4. Ilhan Cevik, "Something's going on in east Turkey," *Turkish Daily News*, Nov. 11, 1985, p. 5.

1

Background

Origins

The origin of the Kurds is uncertain, although many scholars believe them to be the descendants of various Indo-European tribes which settled in the area as many as 4000 years ago. The Kurds themselves claim to be the descendants of the Medes who overthrew Nineveh in 612 B.C., and also recite interesting myths about their origins involving King Solomon, jinni, and other magical agents.¹ Many believe that the Kardouchoi, who gave Xenophon and his 10,000 such a mauling as they retreated from Persia in 400 B.C., were the ancestors of the Kurds.

In the seventh century A.D., the conquering Arabs applied the name "Kurds" to the mountainous people they Islamicized in the region, and history records that the famous Saladin, who fought against Richard the Lionheart and the Christian Crusaders so successfully in the twelfth century, was a Kurd.

Divisions

Whatever their exact origin, it is clear that racially the Kurds today constitute a mixture of various groupings, the result of earlier invasions and migrations.² What is more, it should be noted that, although the Indo-European Kurdish language is an important element of the Kurdish culture, it too is divided into three major dialects (Kurdi, Kurmanji, and Zara), the first two of which are further split into distinct subdialects. The Turkish Kurds use the

Kurmanji and Zara dialects which are, for the most part, mutually unintelligible.

Tribalism too has prevented Kurdish unity. Indeed, it is probably true that the tribe has received more loyalty than any sense of Kurdish nationalism. In all of the Kurdish revolts of the twentieth century, for example--whether in Turkey, Iraq, or Iran--significant numbers of Kurds have supported the government because of their tribal antipathies for those rebelling. Similarly, the aghas (feudal landlords or tribal chieftains) and sheikhs (religious leaders) continue to command allegiances inconsistent with the full development of a modern sense of nationalism.

Although most Turkish Kurds are Sunni Muslims of the Shafii jurisprudence (in contrast to the Turks of Turkey who are Sunni Muslims of the Hanefite school) many Kurds are attracted to various Dervish orders whose differences tend further to divide them. In addition, a significant number of Turkish Kurds adhere to an unorthodox form of Shiism and in Turkey are referred to as "Alevis."³

Population

The Kurdish population in Turkey constitutes a majority in the following southeastern Anatolian provinces which border on or are located near Syria, Iraq, and Iran: Mardin, Siirt, Hakkari, Diyarbakir, Bitlis, Mus, Van, and Agri. In addition, significant numbers also live in the contiguous provinces of Urfa, Adiyaman, Malatya, Elazig, Tunceli, Erzincan, Bingol, and Kars. Because of deportations and more voluntary migrations, some also live in various other parts of Turkey such as Istanbul.

No precise or even reliable estimate of the Kurdish population exists, however. Over zealous Kurds claim figures as high as 26,000,000 with 12,000,000 of these being in Turkey alone.⁴ Another Kurdish source in 1975 claimed that 10.5 million Kurds live in Turkey,⁵ while more recent ones contended that the figure now was either 11 million⁶ or 12 million.⁷ The Kurdish author Kendal (Nezan) wrote that "there were about 8.5 million Kurdish speakers in 1970, which represents 23.8% of the population." He then admitted, however, that because of the inherent difficulties involved, "this figure . . . is probably not very accurate."⁸

On the other hand, the states in which Kurds live probably undercount them for obvious political reasons. The Turkish census of

1965 was the last one to include questions concerning the mother tongue. This indicated that 8 percent of the population might be considered Kurdish and was the resident majority in eight of the southeastern provinces.⁹ It is clear, however, that some Kurds would not have wanted to list Kurdish as their mother tongue or considered Turkish to be so. No census since then has sought to determine the Kurdish population in Turkey. As Kendal has observed: "Turkish authorities prefer to minimize the numbers, whilst some nationalist groups tend to exaggerate them."¹⁰

Although the U.S. CIA estimated that in 1979 there were approximately "4 to 6 million [Kurds] in Turkey," a figure which represented only "approximately 10 percent" of the total population,¹¹ and the veteran British press observer of Turkey, David Barchard, wrote in 1985 "of perhaps 6-8 million Kurds,"¹² others indicate that the actual total is probably higher. The Turkish weekly, *Briefing*, for example, declared in 1989 that "Turkey's Kurdish population [was] believed to be over 8 million."¹³ Berch Berberoglu has asserted that it is closer to 20 percent,¹⁴ a figure with which David McDowall,¹⁵ Richard Sims,¹⁶ and the careful authority on the Kurds, Martin van Bruinessen,¹⁷ basically agreed. Another recent (1987) estimate of the Kurdish population in Turkey, however, was somewhat less: 9,000,000.¹⁸

In partial explanation for these widely differing population estimates one should note that, given the assimilation into Turkish society undergone by many Kurds, it is not unreasonable for the Turkish government to consider "Turkish," many whom others might call "Kurdish." Ismet Inonu, the famous Turkish lieutenant of and successor to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, for example, was possibly an ethnic Kurd.¹⁹ If he was, however, it did not prevent him from taking a strong Turkish nationalist position against Kurdish claims. Referring to the Kurdish uprisings in eastern Turkey during the 1920s, for example, Inonu declared: "Only the Turkish nation is entitled to claim ethnic and national rights in this country. No other element has any such right."²⁰

Ziya Gökalp, the most famous theoretician of modern Turkish nationalism, was of Kurdish origins. This, however, did not prevent him from penning the famous couplet: "The country of the Turks is not Turkey, nor yet Turkistan. Their country is a vast and eternal land: Turan!"²¹ Other prominent Turks of possible Kurdish backgrounds include: former Presidents Fahri Korutürk and Cevdet Sunay,

former Prime Minister Ferit Melen, and the current (since November 1989) President and former Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal.²² In modern Turkey there can be no doubt that a significant number of historically ethnic Kurds have been completely assimilated into Turkish society and no longer even speak Kurdish.

The Turks came late to the idea of a nation-state, but after it had helped to destroy their multinational Ottoman Empire following World War I and even threatened the very existence of their Anatolian heartland, they too learned to value one for themselves. David Barchard suggests that "the proportion of urban and middle-class Turks whose grandparents came as refugees from the Balkans, Crete, Egypt, the Caucasus or other parts of the Soviet Union is probably well over 50 percent."²³ The modern Republic of Turkey itself was only established after a long and terrible struggle against the invading Greeks in the west, a lesser but still serious one against the Armenians in the east, and the diplomatic victory at Lausanne under which the victorious allies of World War I recognized the new situation. Nurtured on the Kemalist ideology of Republican Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity which had sprung from this earlier trauma of the gradual disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish hesitancy to bolster artificially the number of Kurds in Turkey today can be readily appreciated. On the other hand, the claim by some that the Turkish Kurds are really "mountain Turks" who have forgotten their Turkish origins is as intellectually bankrupt as the now discredited theory of the "Sun Language," which maintained that the origin of all languages was Turkish.

Notes

1. See, for example, C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919-1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 4. Margaret Kahn entitled her delightful account of life among the Iranian Kurds, *Children of the Jinn: In Search of the Kurds and Their Country* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980).

2. For a detailed analysis of the Kurds' complicated and heterogeneous ethnic makeup, see Vladimir Minorsky, "Kurds," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II, 1927, 1132-1155.

3. For an excellent analysis of these linguistic, tribal, and religious differences among the Turkish Kurds, see, in general, M.M. van Bruinessen,

Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan (Utrecht, The Netherlands: University of Utrecht, 1978).

4. *Azadi Kurdistan Humane Foundation* (South San Francisco, California), Mar. 1986, p. 1.

5. "Kurdistan of Turkey," *DRUK* (Defend the Rights of United Kurdistan), Bulletin No. 3, Vol. 1, July 30, 1975.

6. Boug Lana, "The Socio-Economic Framework of National Oppression in Kurdistan-Turkey," *The Kurdish Culture Bulletin* 1 (Nov. 1988), p. 20.

7. B. Jaff, "Northern Kurdistan: The Growing Turmoil," *The Kurdish Observer*, Feb. 1987, p. 14.

8. Kendal [Nezan], "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1980), p. 48.

9. Dankwart A. Rustow, *Turkey: America's Forgotten Ally* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1987), p. 37.

10. Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," p. 48.

11. National Foreign Assessment Center (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency), *The Kurdish Problem in Perspective* (Aug. 1979), p. 8.

12. David Barchard, *Turkey and the West* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1985), p. 13.

13. "Problems Prevail As the Winter Sets In," *Briefing*, Sept. 18, 1989, p. 15.

14. Berch Berberoglu, *Turkey in Crisis* (London: Zed Press, 1982), p. 126n.50.

15. David McDowall, *The Kurds*, Report No. 23 (London: Minority Rights Group, Ltd., 1985), p. 7.

16. Richard Sims, *Kurdistan: The Search for Recognition*, Conflict Study No. 124 (London: The Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1980), p. 3.

17. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, p. 12.

18. Anthony Hyman, *Elusive Kurdistan: The Struggle for Recognition*, Conflict Study No. 214 (London: The Centre for Security and Conflict Studies, 1988), p. 4.

19. Although Inonu's possible Kurdish heritage is seldom mentioned in any sources, see Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt: 1961-1970* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1973), p. 28.

20. *Milliyet*, No. 1636, Aug. 31, 1930, as cited in Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," p. 65.

21. Cited in Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 351.

22. Adnan Kahveci, "On the Question of Ethnic Problems in Turkey," *Turkish Daily News*, June 2, 1987, p. 6.

23. Barchard, *Turkey and the West*, p. 13.

2

Prelude to Conflict

Early in the sixteenth century most of the Kurds loosely fell under Ottoman rule, while the remainder were placed under the Persians.¹ According to the Kurdish authority Kendal, "over fifty insurrections . . . broke out during the [nineteenth] century" in response to the Porte's attempt to impose his authority over the Kurds more thoroughly.² Sheikh Obeidullah's revolt in 1880, probably represented "the first indication of Kurdish political nationalism. . . . [It] aimed at uniting the Kurdish peoples of the Turkish and Persian empires into one state, but . . . failed when both empires cooperated to eliminate the common threat."³

In 1891, Sultan Abdulhamid II created the Hamidiye, a Kurdish cavalry that, according to Robert Olson, was used as part of a policy "to try to establish central authority . . . [and] greater Muslim unity."⁴ The Hamidiye were also used against the Armenians in a policy of divide and rule. Given the training its officers received and its exposure to nationalistic ideas while serving in eastern Anatolia and the Balkans, Olson has concluded that "the Hamidiye were an important stage in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism from 1891 to 1914."⁵ Despite the influences of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the tremendous devastation that occurred in eastern Anatolia during World War I, however, the Kurds of southeastern Anatolia still maintained a traditionalist position of supporting the Caliphate as represented by the Ottoman Sultan.

During World War I, one of U.S. President Wilson's Fourteen Points (Number 12) declared that the non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire should be granted the right of "autonomous development." The stillborn Treaty of Sevres signed in August 1920

provided for "local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas" (Article 62) and in Article 64 even looked forward to the possibility that "the Kurdish peoples" might be granted "independence from Turkey." Turkey's quick revival under Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk)--ironically enough with considerable Kurdish help as the Turks played well on the theme of Islamic unity--altered the entire situation. The subsequent and definitive Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 recognized the modern Republic of Turkey without any special provisions for the Turkish Kurds.

When Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) first began to form a Turkish nation-state after World War I, it was not clear what constituted a Turk.⁶ Thus, Ismet (Inonu's) initial formula of modern Turkey as a "homeland of Kurds and Turks"⁷ might be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to define the term. Soon, however, it was abandoned in favor of a broader definition that included the Kurds as Turks. Given the inchoate fluidity of ethnic consciousness in the Islamic world and the perceived need of political unity, one could argue that such a definition of "Turkish" made sense and was not unreasonable.

Mustafa Kemal's creation of a secular and purely Turkish state, however, altered the situation. From 1925 to 1939, there were three major revolts by the Turkish Kurds: (1) the rising in 1925 of Sheikh Said, the hereditary chief of the powerful Nakhshvandi Dervish sect; (2) the insurrection led by Khoybun (Independence) under General Ihsan Nuri Pasha in the Ararat area in 1930; and finally (3) the Dersim (now called Tunceli) rebellion led by Sheikh Sayyid Rida from 1936 to the end of 1938. All were completely crushed by the vastly superior Turkish military,⁸ and from then on the Turkish Kurds were, until the 1970s, largely quiescent.

Describing what had occurred, Bruinessen wrote that "in Turkey . . . after the great Kurdish nationalist revolts . . . a systematic policy aiming at detribalization and assimilation of the Kurds was adopted. . . . Everything that recalled a separate Kurdish identity was to be abolished: language, clothing, names."⁹ The Turkish Kurds had become "mountain Turks."

The Kurdish authority Kendal put it much more harshly:

During these thirteen years of repression, struggle, revolt, and deportation . . . more than *one and a half million* [emphasis in the original] Kurds were deported and massacred. . . . The entire area beyond the Euphrates . . . was declared out of bounds to foreigners