

## **The Kurds in Turkey and Prospects for Peace**

*Middle East/North Africa*

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**Abstract:** This research paper focuses on the history of Kurds in Turkey and their contemporary challenges. Utilizing a variety of scholarly sources, news sources, and primary sources, this paper aims to explain why and how Turkish Kurds came to be in their current position. This research paper also emphasizes the issue of statelessness and attempts to distinguish between *de facto* statelessness and *de jure* statelessness. By examining Turkey's history of brutal oppression against its Kurdish population, this paper seeks out the possibilities for peace and reconciliation between Ankara and Turkish Kurds. Attention is also given to the current conflict between Turkey and the PKK, in addition to the possibility of Turkish accession into the European Union.

Turkey has sought closer ties with Europe since its founding on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision of a secular, Westernized nation-state. Along the way to Turkification and the establishment of an ethnically homogenous state, Turkey brutally oppressed and marginalized 20% of its population. This segment of the population is comprised of the Turkish Kurds, who are just one sub-group of the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East lacking a permanent nation-state. Despite their extensive and intricate relationships with the territories they have inhabited for decades, the Kurds have been largely excluded from the decision-making processes that formed the current boundaries of modern Middle Eastern nation-states. Numerous instances of human rights violations, repressive policies, and ongoing conflict have contributed to the various conditions of statelessness impacting Turkish Kurds. By failing to provide recognition of the Kurds as a minority

population in need of protection, the Turkish government may be held responsible for the significant number of de facto stateless Kurds residing within its boundaries. Extensive social change and reevaluation of Turkey's internal issues are necessary for the establishment of greater Kurdish autonomy and independence.

The general Kurdish ethnic group stems from the Guti, Kurti, Mede, Mard, Carduchi, and other tribes that have long inhabited a mountainous region on the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia (Yildiz, 2005). This region known as Kurdistan covers approximately 74,000 square miles and once belonged to the indigenous people of the Mesopotamian plains and highlands (CNN, 2019). Between 25 and 35 million Kurds reside in southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran, and southwestern Armenia. Exact and accurate census data on the Kurdish diaspora does

not exist, but widely accepted estimates report that Kurds comprise 20% of the Turkish population, 15-20% of the Iraqi population, 10% of the Syrian population, and the second-largest ethnic group in Iran (CNN, 2019). An additional 1.2 million Kurds reside in Europe, with half of this number located in Germany (The Kurdish Project, n.d.). Much of the Kurdish population residing outside of Kurdistan have fled the brutality of oppressive government regimes (Yildiz, 2005). While the Kurds adhere to different religious practices and languages, they remain united through their struggle for greater autonomy, particularly in Turkey.

The repression of Kurds in Turkey traces back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds considered the creation of an official Kurdistan homeland following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, but the French and British quickly established new

“influence zones” at the end of World War I (BBC, 2019). Per the Sykes-Picot agreement, these zones divided the Kurdish population along the borders of several new states (The Kurdish Project, n.d.). Western allies in the Treaty of Sevres outlined the official dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1920, forcing Turkey to renounce its rights to certain Asian and North African territories and making provisions for an autonomous Kurdish state (Yildiz, 2005). However, the Treaty of Sevres was never ratified, and new Turkish leader Mustapha Kemal Ataturk disregarded the Treaty as it pertained to Kurdish land rights (Yildiz, 2005). The Treaty of Lausanne then marked the conclusion of the Turkish War of Independence in 1923 and recognized Turkey as an independent nation-state by establishing its current borders. The Treaty of Lausanne was recognized by the Allies, “...and Turkish sovereignty was restored over the Kurdish-dominated area accorded

independence under the Treaty of Sevres” (Yildiz, 2005, p. 7). Subsequently, Allied demands for an autonomous Turkish Kurdistan were dropped, and the Kurdistan region was divided among several different nation-states.

The Turkish War of Independence prompted a surge in nationalism, and Kurdish communities in Turkey were mainly treated with distrust (Gurbuz & Akyol, 2017). A combination of suspicions over the Turkish Kurds’ ambitions and Turkey’s need to preserve its newly-acquired independence became a key factor informing policies aimed at the Kurds (Yildiz, 2005). After what many Turks deemed humiliation at Sevres, Ataturk developed a period of Turkification and nationalism centered around the idea of the Turkish nation-state (Yildiz, 2005). Turkification sought to create a unified and ethnically homogenous state, which became synonymous with the destruction of

alternative identities through assimilation and dramatic reforms (Fernandes, 2012). This also meant that citizenship would be based on the majority ethnic group’s language and culture, whereby “...a typical Turkish citizen is considered an ethnic Turk” (Elif et al., 2014). In 1924, a Turkish government mandate forbade Kurdish schools, organizations, publications, and traditional Kurdish clothing and music (Cultural Survival, 2018). The words “Kurd” and “Kurdistan” were also banned, resulting in an uprising led by Sheikh Said in 1925 that was brutally repressed (Yildiz, 2005). Similar policies led to subsequent Kurdish uprisings in Ararat in 1930 and Dersim in 1938. These uprisings, perceived by the Turkish government as symbols of national disunity and separatism, were met with violent repression in the forms of martial law, brutal killings, and forced exile of thousands of Kurds. Sentiments of threat and fear instilled within the Turkish

government were reflected in a 1934 law that divided Turkey into three zones. According to this law, "...the state was vested with the power to compulsorily transfer those from the third 'zone' deemed to 'require assimilation.'" (Yildiz, 2005, p. 16). Consolidated Kurdish communities were dispersed throughout areas where they comprised even smaller populations, thus eroding Kurdish identity and further endangering a vulnerable minority group.

According to the 2009 Turkish Citizenship Law, Turkish citizenship may be acquired by birth or after birth. Article 6 claims, "Turkish citizenship by birth shall be automatically acquired on the basis of descent or place of birth. Citizenship by birth shall be effective from the moment of birth" (Canada, 2016). A child may inherit citizenship from their Turkish mother or Turkish father and, if their parents are not Turkish but they were born in Turkey, may still acquire citizenship. Additionally, article

8 claims, "A child found in Turkey is deemed born in Turkey unless otherwise proven" (Canada, 2016). A person may also acquire Turkish citizenship by application where they must prove five years of residency in Turkey, good moral character, a sufficient level of spoken Turkish, and a sufficient level of income (Canada, 2016). Based on the 2009 law, a child born to Kurdish parents on Turkish soil would be eligible for Turkish citizenship. However, the child's Kurdish parents may choose not to register them with Turkish citizenship for a variety of reasons. If the child is not a registered Turkish citizen, and a Kurdish nation-state does not exist for a Kurdish child to register their citizenship with, then this child could potentially qualify as de facto stateless. Kurds who were not born in Turkey but have migrated and resided in Turkey for some time may also be stateless if they lack citizenship from their native

country and abstain from applying for Turkish citizenship.

The notion of de facto statelessness refers to individuals who, "...formally, hold citizenship of a given country, but feel they cannot rely on that country to meaningfully guarantee and protect their rights" (Massey, 2010). By this notion, it is clear why many Kurds living in Turkey abstain from acquiring Turkish citizenship. The Kurds have been subject to attacks and mass violence by the Turkish government on numerous occasions and have been treated as alien inhabitants since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. It was after the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 that the Turkish government initiated drastic reforms to relocate the Kurds (Olson, 2000). During the Zilan Massacre of 1930, Turkish army forces were sent to occupy the Zilan Valley (Beam, 2015) where they murdered approximately 15,000 people and left them to pile up in the Zilan River (Jozuka, 2012).

The 1934 Turkish Resettlement Law then closed strategic regions of Turkey to the country's minorities in an attempt to maintain ethnic homogeneity. Shortly after the establishment of Resettlement Law, Dersim was classified as the last region of Turkey that had not yet been brought under central government control (Van Bruinessen, 1994). The incident that led to the military campaign against Dersim was reportedly minor, "...and it would seem that the army had been waiting for a direct reason to punish the tribes" (Van Bruinessen, 1994). The inhabitants of Dersim were murdered in excessively brutal ways, which Erdogan publicly apologized for in 2017 (Mustafah, 2017). Historians have since struggled in debating whether to label the Dersim Rebellion as genocide or ethnocide (Olson, 2000).

Turkish Kurds' statelessness and lack of protection from the Turkish government have resulted in countless

human rights abuses, repressive policies, and underdevelopment. Despite the advent of Turkish multi-party democracy in 1945, Ataturk's repressive policies were still reflected in the 1950 Press Law and the severely high levels of illiteracy and poverty in southeast Turkey resulting from economic underdevelopment in the Kurdish region (Yildiz, 2005). Turkey's more recent history and its relationship to the Kurds lends itself to the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Following the military coup of 1980, Turkey's new Constitution and increasing military influence over civilian affairs provided further repressive measures against the Kurds. Growing discontent among Turkish Kurds and decades of suppression formed the basis of the PKK, which began its first full-scale insurgency in August 1984. Since Abdullah Ocalan established the PKK in 1978, the Kurds have been challenged with gaining greater cultural and

political autonomy (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

The Turkish Kurds' most pressing challenge is to maintain their cultural identity while protecting themselves, their families, and their communities during conflict between Turkey and the PKK. Thousands have been killed in Turkey's military campaigns against the PKK, "...and tens of thousands of civilians have been displaced since the 1980s" (Gall, 2019). Some Turkish Kurds worry that Turkey's latest military operation in Syria will bring more oppression against Kurds in both countries. Further, the conflict has increased the number of refugees and migrants who have been forced to leave their homes. The resumption of violence following the end of the Turkish-PKK ceasefire from 2013 to 2015 has negatively impacted Kurdish civilians on both sides of the border, with increased numbers of killings, human rights abuses, and destroyed properties. *The*

*Guardian* reports that nearly 50,000 Kurds have been killed in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict (Ozcan, 2019), and thousands of Turkish Kurds have been arrested "...on often dubious terrorism charges, including Demirtas and many other duly elected Kurdish political leaders" (Hoffman, 2019). The violence has contributed to deep political polarization, political repression, and human rights abuses, leaving little room for Kurdish political expression (Hoffman, 2019). Organizations in the international community such as the European Court of Human Rights have repeatedly called on Turkey to address its human rights violations and to adopt pro-EU reforms that would bring in legislative packages aimed at "...bringing Turkey up to European standards on democracy and human and minority rights" (Yildiz, 2005).

Turkey's treatment of its Kurdish population is reflective of the lack of respect for the minority population at a

governmental level. In order to establish a baseline level of trust and respect, dangerous nationalist sentiment must be dissolved. EU accession has been cited as a tool for Turkey to become more democratic and for Kurds to participate in society and public life on an equal state to other Turkish citizens (Yildiz, 2005, p.18). However, Turkey faces formidable obstacles in moving toward EU accession, in that "...the will to subjugate the Kurds and break up regional Kurdish networks remains entrenched; and the problems in the Southeast continue to be viewed by Turkey as requiring only a military, rather than a political response" (Yildiz, 2005, p. 18). Furthermore, the hostile lens through which Turkish Kurds are viewed as "yet-to-be-assimilated Turks" (Yildiz, 2005, p. 19) must be dissolved. Yildiz argues that the EU has a responsibility to ensure that Turkey overcome this view and that the plight of the Kurds is never forgotten or marginalized in

EU accession negotiations (Yildiz, 2005, p. 19). This argument is largely centered around the idea that Europe has a historical duty and responsibility towards the Kurds, “having engineered their languishing as minorities under hostile state regimes after the First World War and having sold arms to their oppressors” (Yildiz, 2005, p. 19). The prospect of any progressive movement in Turkish governmental views on its Kurdish population is dependent on negotiations of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

Given the escalating violence on both sides of the conflict and the recent withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria, peace talks seem quite distant. However, both sides could benefit from a ceasefire given that the PKK’s military has suffered significantly and Turkey has faced extensive pressure from the international

community. To secure reelection in 2023, Erdogan must deal with Turkey’s current economic crisis, the Syrian refugee issues, and his own harsh, nationalist rhetoric that has eroded his popularity (Hoffman, 2019). A peace process would ease some concerns of Turkey’s neighbors and traditional security partners, while easing the pressure on overstretched Kurdish forces. Incentives to de-escalate should be clear, as the conflict has significantly hindered economic growth and taken thousands of lives. Peace talks could allow the Turkish government and Kurdish forces to negotiate measures for greater social, political, and economic autonomy which could then alleviate some of the conditions of statelessness that Kurds in Turkey face.

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