

ETHNIC IDENTITY VERSUS NATIONAL IDENTITY:

An analysis of PKK terror in relation to identity conflict

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Terror as a social problem, like any other type of deviant behavior and/or crime, is caused by multiple factors. Therefore, in order to solve the problem of terror, social causes of the issue have to be taken into consideration in addition to the armed struggle. Security arrangements and armed intervention are only a part of the struggle against terrorism.

The PKK terror has, for the last twenty years, been one of the most important items on the agenda of the Turkish security services. Social scientists, as well as members of Turkish security services have, recently discussed social causes of the PKK terror.

Over the last several years a number of studies conducted on terror in general and the PKK terror organization in particular, have demonstrated that terror is not only caused by individual deviation. Therefore, it is not a police problem only, but also a social problem.

In short, the terror, which has generally been seen only as a policing problem, in fact has social aspects and will continue to exist unless the social causes of problem are addressed and solved. Within this article PKK terror is analyzed in terms of its being a conflict between ethnic versus a national identity.

Key Words: Terror, PKK, Turkish police, identity, ethnic identity, identity conflict

Introduction **

Terror has, for the last twenty years, been one of the most important items on the agenda of the Turkish security services. PKK terror has an especially important place among other terrorist activities and organizations. Over the last several years a number of studies have been done on terror in general, and the PKK terror organization in particular (Ergil, 1995; Türkdogan, 1996, Ozonder, 1998; Ozdag, 1995). These

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studies have demonstrated that terror is a social problem and is not caused only by individual deviation. The leader of PKK terror organization, Abdullah Ocalan, has been arrested and jailed in Turkey. However, this fact did not make the PKK terror organization cease its activities and it has once more showed that terror is a social problem and it will continue to exist unless the roots of problems are addressed and solved.

Terror as a social problem, like any other type of deviant behavior and/or crime, is caused by multiple factors. Therefore, in order to solve the problem of terror, social causes of the issue have to be taken into consideration in addition to the armed struggle. Security arrangements and armed intervention are only a part of the struggle against terrorism. As the problem has some social causes, these also have to be addressed in efforts to solve the problem. Social scientists as well as members of Turkish security services have recently discussed social causes of the PKK terror.¹

This article is an attempt to analyze only one of the social aspects of the PKK terror. It is the issue of Kurdish identity as a separate ethnic and cultural entity from the Turkish national identity. A number of conflicting arguments have been put forward on this issue. This article will be trying to address some of these arguments.

1. Identity Conflict

During the Gulf War, a Lebanese born scholar Fuad Ajami who lives in the US felt free to use the phrase “We Americans” in a speech delivered on NBC TV, with a heavy Arabic accent. During the Trabzon Boat hijacking in 1996, an entrepreneur in central Anatolia, after expressing his sympathy for the hijackers, added that he was from Abkhaza. When he was asked about when he came to Turkey (since his Turkish had no accent) he responded that his grandfather’s father immigrated to Turkey from Abkhaza.

These two cases indicate how national and ethnic identities could be fluid and constant respectively. They also show the relative ease or stubborn resistance that the states may face in establishing a common identity. Some western democracies, such as the USA and the UK, created national identities, which are not based on religion, ethnicity or race, but on ‘common interests’. It is true that these identities rely on the mainstream and dominant cultural norms, values and beliefs, however they are umbrella identities which aim to cover a wide range of groups from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Multi-ethnic societies, such as the UK and the USA, are bound together with a unifying concept, common standards, or at least some mutual material benefits. The unifying concepts such as “Britishness” or “Americanness” serve their purpose as long as they provide

¹ *Fırat Üniversitesi ve Elazığ Emniyet Müdürlüğü (1998) 'Doğu Anadolu'da Güvenlik ve Huzur Sempozyumu', 17-19 Aralık 1998; Elazığ Fırat Üniversitesi (2000) 'I. Milletlerarası Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Güvenlik ve Huzur Sempozyumu', 27-29 Mart 2000, Elazığ.*

'something positive' to the members of the state. When they fail to deliver material or immaterial benefits to the citizens, other ethnic or religious identities, i.e. Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Kurdish, Scottish, begin to compete with or work against the national identity.

National identities based on such a common interest may function harmoniously with other ethnic or religious identities as long as common interests are distributed relatively justly. When a national identity favors certain ethnic/religious group or groups over others, or fails to deliver the presumed common benefits, it may face resistance from other identities and eventually might lead to conflict.

History provides many examples of attaining an identity, which binds all citizens, while preserving local ethnic identities. Hellenistic, Roman and Ottoman identities are among them. The Ottoman State was multi-national and multi-cultural and was based on a *millet* system, which functioned relatively well for its time.² Although the dominant culture was Turkish and Islamic, the remaining communities retained their identities. Armenians, for example, were referred as 'the most obedient' (*Millet-i Sadika*) subjects of the Empire although they were neither Turks nor Muslims.

Turkey (i.e., Anatolia) has always been a multi ethnic and cultural land.³ Because of its geographical location, it was a stage for many invasions and migrational waves both from the east and the west and it was a meeting place between Asia and Europe, as well as Islam and Christianity. The cultural, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity was the norm rather than exception in Turkey. Despite the fact that the Anatolia has always been a land of different cultures and ethnic groups, the Turkish culture has always been dominant compared to other cultures. For this reason, 'mosaic' may not be the best phrase to describe the ethnic and cultural fabric of Anatolia. The word 'minority' has a rather different meaning in Turkish history. Throughout the Turkish presence and rule in Anatolia (Turkey), religious minorities such as Jews and Christians have only been regarded and treated as ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, Muslim subjects of Turkish states such as Abkhazas, Laz (people of Black Sea coast), Bosnians, Georgians, Albanians, Caucasians, Chechens and Kurds have always been regarded as an integral part of the dominant culture. Most of the time these groups have voluntarily preferred to connect with the Ottoman or Turkish society rather than identifying themselves as a separate and independent minority group living under an alien dominant culture. One of the most important factors influencing which

² *Millet System was an administration model, which the Ottoman State was based upon. It gave different religious groups and minorities the right to establish their own educational and religious and judicial institutions. Thanks to the millet system, various ethnic minorities, during the Ottoman rule, enjoyed many rights, which even in modern society many modern states have not been able to provide to their ethnic groups.*

³ Günes-Ayata, A., (1996) 'Türkiye'de Etnik Kimlik ve Etnik Gruplar', *Toplum ve Göç: II Ulusal Sosyolojik Kongresi, Başbakanlık Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü*; Türkdoğan, O. (1996) *Sosyal Şiddet ve Türkiye Gerçeği*; İstanbul: Timaş; Aydın, A. (1992) *Kürtler, PKK ve A. Öcalan*, Ankara: Kiyap. pp.24-31.

made these groups to identify themselves with the dominant Turkish culture and identity was its association with the religion of Islam.

In the 19th century, when the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire was challenged internally and externally, she went through a series of stages which modified the *millet system*: the *Ottomanism* of Tanzimat era, the *Panislamism* of Abdulhamid period, and finally Turkish *Nationalism* of the Committee of Union and Progress.

Modern Turkey was established on the idea of nation state and it was based on Turkish nationalism. Turkish identity revealed many forms and it has not been clearly stated how much of one's cultural, ethnic and religious peculiarities should be sacrificed in order to be recognized as a 'Turk'. The word "Turk" or "Turkish" is used for two different meanings: first, it is a name for the people who migrated from Central Asia to Anatolia, and chose to make this land their country. Second, it is also used as term of national identity for the people living in Turkey.⁴ The Turkish national identity defined in the Turkish Constitution is a *legal* conception, not an *ethnic* one.⁵

This usage, which is very similar to that of British and American, covers Turks as well as other communities who live in Turkey such as, Kurds, Abkhazas, Circassians, Laz, Bosnians, Georgians, Albanians, Caucasians, Armenians, Greeks, Syriac Christians and Jews etc. The members of these communities mostly think of themselves as of Turkish nationality, but many may not call themselves "Turk" in the ethnical sense of the word.

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, ethnic minorities did not object or at least express strong resistance to the national identity of the state; however, there were some exceptions. In the early 1920s and 1930s, in the eastern parts of Turkey, there occurred several Kurdish uprisings which were immediately suppressed by the state. These uprisings, however, cannot be summed under the banner of *purely* ethnic resistance towards the national identity of Turkish State as some of these uprisings were local and some religiously tinted, but there is no doubt that they had an ethnic impetus, i.e., Kurdish.

There are a number of arguments about the origin of the Kurds.⁶ Some claim that Kurds constitute a distinct ethnic entity (race) with their language, folklore, culture and common history. Others argue that Kurdish identity cannot think of itself independently from that of the Turkish identity.⁷ According to this thesis, both identities are interrelated and have developed together throughout history. Certain attempts have also been made, although unsuccessfully, to trace Kurdish culture back to Central Asia.⁸ Be that as it may, one can state with certainty that

⁴ *Türk Demokrasi Vakfı* (1995) p.5.

⁵ *Turkish Constitution 1982: Article 66: "Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk".*

⁶ *Türkdoğan, (1996) pp.*

⁷ *Aydın, (1992) pp.24-31.*

⁸ *Türkdoğan, (1996) pp.*

the Turks and the Kurds experienced a historical coalescence. When the Turks invaded, or conquered Anatolia and the eastern parts of it, they did not fight with the Kurds.⁹ The Manzikert battle (Malazgirt) took place between the Turkish and the Byzantine armies. The Kurds even fought against the Byzantines alongside the Turks.

Historically the relationships between the Ottoman Empire and Kurdish tribes, and also the Turkish State and the Kurds, were below the threshold for calling it tumultuous. There has been a growing tension in the last two decades in the eastern parts of Turkey and in the early nineties, the tension reached the level of an “unlabeled” or “civil” war. It is important to understand the nature of the Kurdish conflict and its causes properly in order to look for the right analysis and sound solutions. Certain rudimentary points should be made with regard to the nature of the conflict.

First, it is not a conflict originating from racism. This is perhaps too obvious of a point to be made but nevertheless it should be stressed that it does not resemble at the minimum the racial conflicts that occurred in Germany, the USA or South Africa. The models which take this approach could provide very little understanding for the case at present. Turkish Kurds enjoy full citizenship in Turkey and participate in all aspects of political, economic, and social life. Almost one in three of the members of parliament in the Grand National Assembly are of Kurdish origin. A number of leading officials in Turkey have been and are of Kurdish origin. There have been presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, generals in the armed forces and chief constables in the police force among the citizens of Kurdish origin.

Second, it is also not a conflict originating from religious differences. Although the majority of the Turks are from the *Hanafites* Islamic legal school, and the majority of the Kurds are *Shafi'ites*, the difference between these two legal schools are pertinent only to practical matters, i.e., rituals and ‘conducts’ (*muamelat*), not to matters of creed. It bears no similarity to the Catholic and Protestant ingredients of the Irish conflict. This point also has to be stressed since religious differences between the Turks and the Kurds are invoked frequently as a point of contrast in the foreign literature on the subject. Protestant denominations or Catholic orders would be more analogous, if a comparison has to be made. Religion is far from playing a divisive role in the conflict. On the contrary, an argument can be made for its unifying and appeasing role for ethnic tension.¹⁰

Finally, the nature of the conflict cannot be reduced to a single dimension. It cannot be understood and explained from a single vantage point; it is multi-dimensional and any attempt to reduce the problem to a single cause would fail all together.

⁹ Erkal, M. (1994) *Etnik Tuzak*, İstanbul: Turan Kültür Vakfı, p. 208.

¹⁰ Some young researchers fail to appreciate the positive effect of religion in reducing the conflict, see Chris Houston, “Islamic Solutions to the Kurdish Problem: Late Rendevous or Illegitimate Shourcut?” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Spring 1997, 1-22.

2. Some of the Causes of PKK Terror

The reasons that led to the emergence of the PKK terror can only be understood in a broader context of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. One reason is the cultural and political restrictions that the Kurds experienced in the Turkish Republic. The new Republic, conscious of the Ottoman experiences with identity formation and the socio-political developments in Europe with regard to nation state, decided that Turkish nationality had to be maintained even at the expense of other ethnic identities.¹¹ Turkish has become the official language of the state and the Turkish identity was vigorously promoted. All education was to be carried out in Turkish and the use of Kurdish along with other ethnic languages was banned.¹² The ban on Kurdish, however, was lightened from 1950 on and its private and public use was tolerated until 1991 when the law was annulled.¹³

Another reason for the rise of the PKK terror originates from the economic conditions. The economic deprivation of the southeast has been persistent throughout the twentieth century. The major source of income for the people in the area is agriculture and animal husbandry. The people who live in the areas, which border Syria, Iraq and Iran, are also involved with smuggling, which is officially tolerated, in the previous decades. Compared to the western parts of Turkey, the southeast received less government investment and the average yearly income is depressingly low. The social services are scarce and unevenly distributed. The developmental projects and social reforms of the Turkish Government were less than successful for the most part. Recent surveys indicate that the PKK recruits most of its members from the socio-economically bereaved sections of the Kurdish community.¹⁴ The economic poverty combined with educational privation exacerbates the situation.

If there had been reasons for despair, there are nonetheless reasons to be hopeful. Some recent studies indicate that the ethnic conflict among the Kurds "above all, a difficult and sometimes painful process of economic transition."¹⁵ The immigration of the Kurds to western Turkey since the 1960 helped them to improve their economic conditions. Furthermore, the ongoing Government projects, such as the Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP), once completed, is believed to bring economic prosperity to the area and increase agricultural productivity 14-fold. Finally, industrialization is taking root in some parts of the region.¹⁶ It is not surprising that 65% of the people who were surveyed in the area find unemployment

¹¹ Exceptions were the Greeks, Armenians and Jews had the minority rights under the Treaty of Lozan.

¹² The Kurdish uprisings in 1920s and 1930s only exacerbated the situations.

¹³ For an unfair description of the cultural and political restrictions that the Kurds faced in the Turkish Republic, see Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey" in *People Without a Country: Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaland. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993: 38-94, pp. 73-79.

¹⁴ Ozonder, M. C. (1998) 'Terörün Sosyo-Kültürel Yonleri', *Cumhuriyetin 75. Yilinda: Dogu Anadoluda Güvenlik ve Huzur Sempozyumu 17-19 Aralik 1998, Elazig*.

¹⁵ Ayata, Ayşe. "The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey," *New Perspectives On Turkey*, Fall 1997, p. 62.

¹⁶ *ibid*.

as the most urgent problem. The Kurdish problem follows unemployment with 12.5% and terror takes the third place with 9.7%¹⁷ It is also not surprising that the PKK gives priority to blocking the attempts for the economical improvement of the region. The government projects and liberal policies are labeled as “bourgeois capitalism” aimed at undermining the Kurdish nationalism.

3. PKK and Terror

Terror, like any other social phenomena, has a number of aspects. One of the common characteristics of terror activities of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is the refusal of a ‘national identity’. PKK argues that the Kurds have an independent national identity and opposes the Turkish national identity. Although the PKK claims to be a Marxist organization, its struggle is based on ethnic conflict to gain some territory and a national identity. It is also one of the few surviving revolutionary Marxist groups.¹⁸ Its real aim is to dismember the Turkish State in order to establish an independent, Kurdish, Marxist-Leninist State.¹⁹

The atrocities of the PKK are well documented. Since its inception in the late seventies, it has not only targeted the Turkish military forces but also civilians who live in metropolitan areas. The founding members of the PKK were alienated, persecuted, tortured and eventually executed.²⁰ However its prominent victims were the Kurdish villagers who lived in southeastern Turkey and did not approve or tacitly opposed the PKK. Apparently, the PKK justified indiscriminate killings of the villagers who were mostly women and children because they were claimed to “bring dishonor to the name ‘Kurd’”.²¹ The civilian massacres in the region were legitimized by the PKK, since they were seen as necessary steps for the organization’s acceptance by the locals.

The PKK is a despotic organization run by a leader, Abdullah Öcalan who was depicted in a western magazine as “having the compassion of a Cobra.” He holds an absolute power within the organization. “Revolutionary revenge” according to the PKK, will “assume the form of revolutionary revenge”.²² Some of the ex-leading members of the PKK who escaped the PKK remain in hiding. The books written by these people provide first hand information about violent methods of the organization even against its own members. The sexual abuse of the women in the PKK is another tormenting aspect of the organization, at

¹⁷ Özdağ, Ümit (koordinatörlüğünde bir grup bilimadami). *Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesinde ve Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu’da Batı’ya Göç Edenlerde Kültürel Yapı ve Kültürel Kimlik Sorunu*. Türk Ar: Türk-Metal İş Sendikası, Ankara 1995, p. 432.

¹⁸ Directorate General of Press and Information of the Turkish Republic (1995) *The PKK, Kurtuluş Olsun*: Ankara.

¹⁹ Aydın, (1992); Aydın (1993) *Üçgöçendeki Tezgaah*, Ankara: Kiyap Yayın-Dağıtım.

²⁰ See for the details, Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990, pp. 61-62, 74

²¹ *Ibid*, 87.

²² *Ibid*, 61.

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