

Turkey and the Kurds

The political divide



The Turkish military once again claims to be on the verge of defeating the rebellious Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Yet, while the Turkish armed forces have achieved some significant successes against the PKK, the rebellion is still far from over. The PKK retains enough forces to harass Turkish security units in the south-eastern provinces.

Moreover, the Kurdish issue in Turkey has always been a struggle for recognition and identity denied by the state. It is perhaps this realisation that has prompted the Turkish military command to suggest that non-military means are necessary to suppress the insurgency once and for all. Chief of the General Staff General Ismail Hekki Karadayi and influential officers such as General Cevic Bir have increasingly argued that the PKK has been marginalised, and that economic and social development must accompany military action.

Politically, the basis for a meaningful dialogue between Ankara and the Kurds still seems limited, although significant changes in Turkish attitudes are taking place. Progress remains painfully slow, however, and an indefinite continuation of the bloody conflict is likely.

Ironically, the military is one of the greatest obstacles to bridging the political divide. While not obsessed with the use of force and recognising the need to address Kurdish socio-economic needs, the armed forces remain vehemently opposed to any recognition of Kurdish identity.

Background to the rebellion

The PKK-led insurrection began in 1984, and has so far claimed an estimated 22,000 lives. The insurgency was strongest in the early 1990s when it was bolstered by an international and regional environment hospitable to the emergence of new nationalist ideas and forces. The violence perpetrated by both sides, as well as a deliberate government campaign to evacuate villages, has led to the depopulation of much of the region. Special government security teams, acting with complete autonomy, have also committed widespread human-rights violations, thus exacerbating

Turkey's problematic relations with its European allies. These units are widely accused of being involved in the abductions and murders of many people thought to be sympathetic to the Kurdish cause. For its part, the PKK has also committed widespread acts of violence against those it has suspected of not giving it complete support.

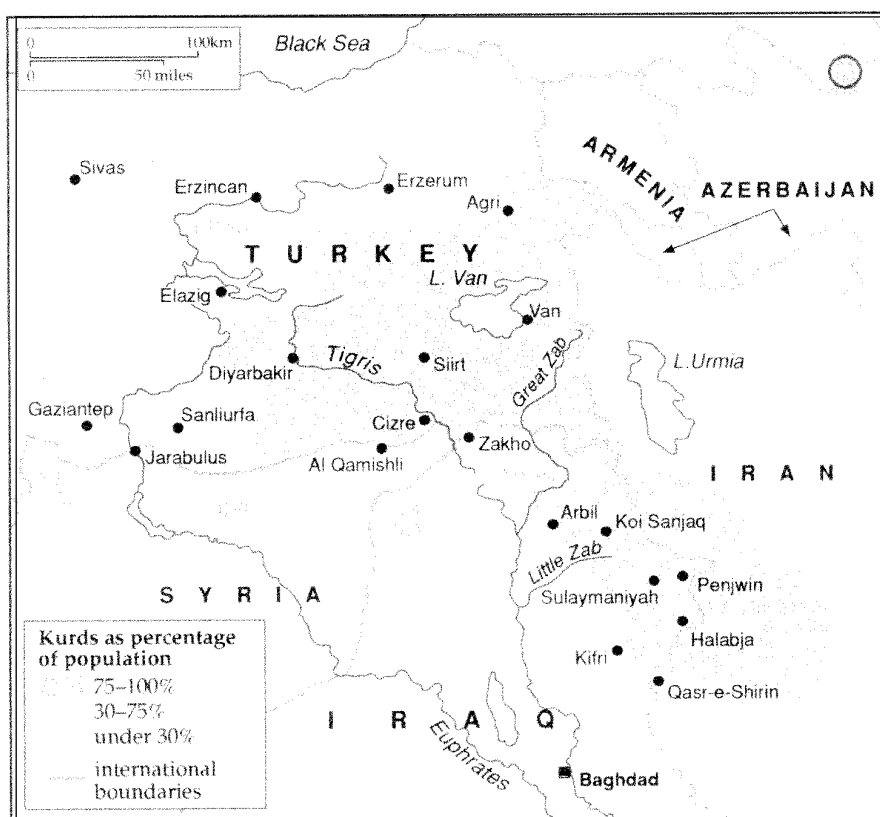
The estimated 13 million Kurds living in Turkey – approximately one-fifth of the country's population – have been the object of an intense assimilation campaign by the state ever since the Turkish Republic's establishment in 1923.

Officially, Ankara has refused even to acknowledge the Kurds' existence. Disdainful of their culture and history, successive Turkish governments have tried to mould the Kurds into Turks – with some success. However, a significant number of Kurds either refused to assimilate, or were simply ignored by the government and left to their marginal existence in the east and south-east of the country.

Turkey's political élite

Turkish political parties, with the exception of the ultra-nationalist National Action Party (NAP), are slowly realising that the use of force is not a 'solution' to the Kurdish problem. However, for the mainstream parties, this creates a dilemma. While not wishing to offend the military nor be accused of appeasing the PKK, they understand the problems created by the insurrection, including the potential loss of votes to the ruling Welfare Party (WP) or the smaller, officially tolerated Kurdish parties.

Two Kurdish political parties – the People's Labour Party (HEP) and the Democracy Party (DEP) – were banned in July 1993 and June 1994 respectively by the authorities for alleged connections to the PKK, and DEP parliamentary members were subsequently jailed. The successor party to the HEP and the DEP is the People's Democracy Party (HADEP).



The Welfare Party

▶ The WP's ideological message was always more tolerant of Kurdish identity because it highlighted the importance of Islamic unity. The Party argues that the Kurdish problem has been created by the forcible secularisation of the state and society. Because of the Kurds' historically conservative and religious beliefs, the WP has successfully managed to recruit Kurdish support. In fact, ⅔ of the WP's 160 members of parliament are Kurds. However, the WP government has come under increasing pressure from the military and, despite its claims to be an Islamist party, remains very nationalistic. Yet, compared to other parties, it continues to be more accommodating on the Kurdish question.

The True Path Party

Turkish Foreign Minister Tansu Ciller and her True Path Party (TPP) represent the radical centre-right. When Ciller became Prime Minister in June 1993 she had little knowledge of the Kurdish issue and was quickly convinced by hardliners in the security establishment to adopt an uncompromising position. Ciller engineered the ban on the DEP, and has also brought many members of the security élite into the TPP. Among the more prominent figures is former Interior Minister Mehmet Agar, who resigned in November 1996 under suspicion of links to criminal groups.

During Ciller's tenure as Prime Minister the most egregious oppression occurred, with what amounted to state authorised assassinations and kidnappings of opponents suspected of being sympathetic to the Kurds (and not necessarily the PKK).

The Motherland Party

The attitude of the Motherland Party (MP) is more complex. While both the MP and TPP have traditional Kurdish leaders in their midst, the MP decided in 1996 to be more supportive of a peaceful solution. Nevertheless, the Party also has its contingent of hardline nationalists opposed to any kind of political solution. Caught between his moderates (such as Korkut Ozal, the brother of the former President Turgut Ozal) and their opponents, MP leader Mesut Yilmaz has generally tried to shy away from the Kurdish problem.

The centre-left

The centre-left is divided into two factions. Its internationalist wing, led by

Republican People's Party (RPP) leader Deniz Baykal, has been more accommodating to Kurdish concerns, especially human rights. The RPP has tried to alleviate the suffering in the south-east, and in 1991 was instrumental in bringing HEP leaders into parliament as part of an electoral alliance. However, escalating repression during the RPP's coalition with the TPP lost the Party its Kurdish support base.

The nationalist left

The nationalist left is led by Bulent Ecevit and his Democratic Left Party. On both secularism and the Kurdish issue, Ecevit has assumed a dogmatic, hardline stance. As far as he is concerned the Kurdish problem does not exist. It is simply a problem of terrorism engendered by backward economic conditions in south-east Turkey.

A conservative approach

None of Turkey's political parties are comfortable with the notion of a separate Kurdish identity. Those parties more likely to make concessions – the WP, the RPP and the MP – would limit any compromises to very circumscribed cultural reforms, such as local media broadcasts in Kurdish and the lifting of all legal regulations prohibiting the use of the Kurdish language in private life. All the parties claim to be prepared to spend money to improve economic conditions in the region, but these have never yet materialised because of the security situation.

The political élite's conservatism on the Kurdish issue is reflected in the absence of any meaningful parliamentary legislation. The only substantive action taken in parliament was the 1991 revocation of the law banning the use of Kurdish. Parliament has yet to consider any proposal on the use of the language for broadcasting or for establishing public or private Kurdish-language schools. The Turkish National Security Council is unlikely to grant final approval of either of these issues in the near future.

The mirror image: the PKK

The PKK was established in 1974 as an off-shoot of Turkey's violent political left. The organisation and its leaders originally espoused a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist approach, and advocated independence for Turkey's Kurds. Using violent methods the PKK has managed to impose itself on Turkey's Kurdish population.

The PKK is perhaps the strongest political actor among the Kurds. Even those who abhor its tactics admit that it has succeeded in promoting the Kurdish case. PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan – based in Damascus and the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon – has fashioned an organisation that is completely loyal to him, encouraging a personality cult reminiscent of old-style communist leaders.

While the PKK has abandoned its hopes for independence, and increasingly talks of a solution that would leave Turkey intact, the conflict remains its primary *raison d'être*. Even though the PKK cannot win militarily, by pursuing the armed struggle it maintains control over its adherents and recruits, and impedes the emergence of other non-violent Kurdish political movements.

Ironically, in this latter endeavour its strongest ally is the state, which has always found reason to prosecute and ban moderate Kurdish intellectuals and political groups. In effect, by rendering the PKK the only significant Kurdish organisation, the state has attempted to delegitimise Kurdish aspirations for a better solution to the problem.

Conclusion

The Kurdish issue, perhaps more than any other, has damaged Turkey's relations with its allies and is unlikely to be resolved soon. Although the military has made some progress in its fight against the PKK, it can only realistically hope to contain, rather than defeat, the insurgents. With the institutionalisation of Kurdish dissent in Turkey and abroad, the issue will continue to preoccupy decision-makers and consume limited and valuable resources.

The state's persecution of Kurdish political parties has restricted responsible Kurdish political activity and, consequently, undermined the search for a middle ground. The manipulation of nationalist instincts has effectively, and at least temporarily, eliminated moderate political parties from the search for a solution.

All mainstream Turkish parties have failed to develop a comprehensive approach to the problem and, more importantly, they remain incapable of fashioning a political strategy to resolve the situation. The culture of violence in south-east Turkey and the Army's effective hold over any meaningful political discourse on the Kurdish question allow little room for optimism in the near future. ■