

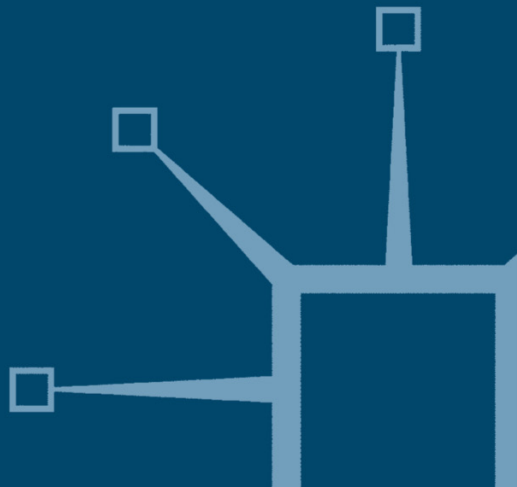
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# The State and Kurds in Turkey

The Question of Assimilation

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Metin Heper



# The State and Kurds in Turkey

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# The State and Kurds in Turkey

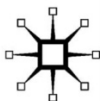
## The Question of Assimilation

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# Preface

When the author was a student at Ankara College (secondary high school) from 1956 to 1959, next to him sat a student whose last name was Bahar. It took two or three years for the author to realize that Bahar was a Jewish citizen of Turkey. He found that out on a day in May of either 1958 or 1959. That year, May was a month of the Ramadan, the month the Muslims fast. It was a rather warm day. A group of students, including the author, were going to play soccer during the noon break. They were, however, one player short. The author asked Bahar to join them; Bahar said he did not want to. Thinking that Bahar was fasting, the author tried to persuade Bahar to play with them by saying that it is a warm day all right, but several other students are also fasting (many out of fashion, not because they were practicing Muslims), and that not being able to drink water for another five to six hours, despite the fact we would all perspire a lot, would not be the end of the world. Bahar responded by saying, 'It is not that Metin. Today, I just don't feel like it'. Then he added, 'By the way, Metin, I am not a Muslim'. The author did not pay much attention to the very last sentence, nor did he think about it later. In the mid-1980s, one evening the author went to a fish restaurant in Istanbul. That evening, the proprietor, Zühtü Bey, whom the author had come to know well and who always enjoyed having a chitchat with the author, was not in the mood. Zühtü Bey explained what bothered him: '*Hocam* (Sir), you will not believe what I am going to tell you. I have just been told that late last night, some of my supposedly Turkish waiters beat some of my supposedly Kurdish waiters. What is this? What is going on in this country?'

At the time, armed clashes had already started between the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*-PKK) and government forces in Turkey; however, Zühtü Bey could not see a relationship between the fight at his restaurant and the large scale 'troubles' taking place in the country.

In the 1980s and later, those who penned works on the Kurdish issue in Turkey have tended to argue that the 'troubles' in question were due to the 'fact' that the state in that country had tried to assimilate the Kurds, or otherwise acted in a rather harsh manner towards them; the Kurds put up a resistance, rebelling from time to time, and the state had made resort to further oppressive acts. Could this be a valid response to Zühtü Bey's query of what had been going on in the country? Could Zühtü Bey be a totally ignorant person or could the above narrative concerning the Kurdish issue in Turkey miss something important? Going back to the 1950s, if such a major event as an attempt at ethnic cleansing had taken place in a country, could

someone with a high school education not pay any attention at all to whether someone he knew well was a Muslim or non-Muslim?

It was with those and some related questions in mind that the author, in 1994, signed a book contract with what was at the time Macmillan Press, and what today is Macmillan Palgrave Press. The author thinks he has come up with a satisfactory answer to both of the queries raised above. He is, however, curious whether readers of this book, too, will find plausible his narrative of what the Kurdish issue in Turkey is all about.

The author is grateful to Professors Ahmet Evin, Clement H. Dodd, Carter Vaughn Findley, Şükrü Hanioglu, Halil İnalçık, Kemal H. Karpat, Andrew Mango, Sabri Sayarı, late Stanford J. Shaw, and Frank Tachau, who read all or some draft chapters of this book and shared their profound knowledge and wisdom with him. Needless to point out, the author alone is responsible for the final product.

The author also would also like to thank a series of editors of Macmillan Press and/or Palgrave Macmillan, starting with Mr T. M. Farmiloe and ending with Ms Alison Howson and Amy Lankester-Owen who, for the past thirteen years, have never lost hope that one day the publisher was going to receive a manuscript from him!

# 1

## Introduction

In the twentieth century, from the 1920s onwards, Turkish state's relations with its citizens of Kurdish origin (below, 'Kurds') have at times been rather problematic. Between 1920 and 1938 alone, that country faced 17 Kurdish rebellions, three of them, those of 1925, 1930, and 1937, being major ones. Then, between 1984 and 1999, Turkey had been the scene of protracted armed conflict between Kurdish separatists and government forces. The estimated loss of life from both sides during that second round of 'troubles' was around 35.000.

Turkey has been a suitable milieu for the emergence of a Kurdish issue. A reliable public opinion survey made in May 2006 has found that 'those who spoke with their parents in [any one of the dialects of] Kurdish' constituted 13.2 per cent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Another public opinion survey carried out in March 2007 by one of the leading national newspapers – *Milliyet* – has found that the 'Kurds; comprise 15.6 per cent of the population, or 11.5 million people.'<sup>2</sup> In 2007, Turkey's overall population was 73 million. Hence, in terms of numbers alone, the Kurds in Turkey have not constituted a marginal group. Moreover, the Kurds have not been an immigrant group; they have lived in what today is Turkey and adjacent territories for long centuries. Furthermore, although an important portion of the Kurds are dispersed in different parts of the country, quite a few of them still live in southeastern Turkey, which is one of the country's least socio-economically developed regions.

Not surprisingly, there are several studies on the state and Kurds in Turkey. Yet, they have not been able to adequately explain the relations between the state and its Kurdish citizens. As will be elaborated below, the studies on ethnic conflict in general as well as those on the Middle East and Turkey tend to view ethnic conflict as a cycle of (1) efforts on the part of states to forcefully assimilate certain ethnic elements, (2) the resistance of those elements to such efforts, sometimes by resort to rebellions, and (3) the state's suppression of the rebellious elements, followed by the intensification of the efforts to assimilate the still unassimilated. Within the framework of this paradigm, it

is taken for granted that ethnic conflict is virtually a never ending conflict and that it lingers on until either a voluntary or forceful assimilation occurs. It is also assumed that all along rather hostile parties continue to face each other.

In Turkey, however, between the two rounds of 'troubles' mentioned above, that is, from 1938 to 1984, there had been relative peace and quiet. When the third major Kurdish rebellion had been suppressed in 1938, Professor Hans Henning von der Osten, a German archaeologist who traveled in the area, made the following observation: 'The Kurds ..., [who] are generally abandoning their nomadic way of life and settling in villages, have come to take pride in considering themselves citizens of Turkey, frequently intermarry with the Turkish population, send their children to the Government schools, and have come to constitute a loyal and law abiding element in the population.'<sup>3</sup> There is another matter that remains an open question in terms of the present paradigm: when Turkey was in a very vulnerable position in the wake of the First World War, that is, when the armies of that country were dissolved and the weapons of that country confiscated by the British, French, and others countries, why did the Kurds not think of taking advantage of that situation, and attempt to obtain their independence from Turkey? Instead, in 1919–1922, during the Turkish War of Independence, the Kurds, together with the other ethnic elements of the population, contributed to the efforts to maintain the very existence of Turkey. In a parallel manner, whenever a conflict between the state and the Kurds seemed to have come to an end, the state tended to act as if the country had not gone through a period of serious confrontations, in which many people lost their lives; during such periods, the state usually acted in a rather 'forgiving manner' towards its Kurdish citizens, as any country would when it comes to a group of citizens whom it would not consider any different from its other citizens. The descendants of Shaikh Said and his associates, who led a major Kurdish rebellion in 1925, were, by 1998, still politically active both within the Turkish Parliament as well as the Kurdish community.<sup>4</sup> All in all, the present paradigm of the assimilation-resistance-assimilation model in respect to ethnic conflict remains less than satisfactory to explain the Turkish case.

As it has been aptly pointed out, 'the resolution of the problem of ethnic conflict depends on the definition of the problem'.<sup>5</sup> One may suggest that the correct definition of the problem itself is conditional upon having an adequate grasp of the empirical reality relating to the problem in question. The latter in turn would depend on whether one has made plausible assumptions and thus posed appropriate questions.

On the whole, when it comes to ethnic conflict, both the general literature and those on the Middle East are informed by the assimilation-resistance-assimilation paradigm mentioned above. The dominant view in the general literature concerning ethnic conflict, as summarized by John Coakley,

derives from the assumption of unequal centre-periphery relations; control of the centre by a dominant ethnic group, and the consequent suppression of other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the ethnic conflict in the Middle East, a similar approach prevails. For instance, Nader Entessar has argued that, 'the response of the ethnic periphery is normally volatile in cases where the political center is heavily controlled by the dominant cultural entity in the society'.<sup>7</sup> Concerning the Middle East, Arthur C. Turner has also made a related argument: 'Imperial regimes have everywhere crumbled, giving way to successor states that are frequently despotic and sometimes scarcely viable. The sanctity of existing boundaries, whatever they may be, is defended against nationalist or subnationalist threats to them by no one more strenuously than the rulers of those nations.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Present paradigm and its shortcomings**

Leading students of the Kurdish problem in Turkey have also perceived the ethnic conflict in the country in the same light. Michael Gunther has argued that 'the official ideology of the Republic of Turkey sought to deny the existence of the Kurdish people in that country. To do this, the authorities attempted to eliminate much that might suggest a separate Kurdish nation'.<sup>9</sup> Martin van Bruinessen has contended that '... there are strong ideological impediments to the recognition of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group with its own culture, and further concessions are almost unthinkable. The military and civilian elites (which include 'assimilated Kurds') are deeply committed to the Kemalist dogma that the people of Turkey are one homogeneous nation, and they perceive each denial of unity as a vital threat to the state'.<sup>10</sup> Robert Olson has talked of Turkey's 'struggle against Kurdish nationalism'.<sup>11</sup> Anthony Hyman has suggested that 'The official Turkish position on the Kurds is simple; there is no Kurdish problem in Turkey – only in Iraq and Iran'.<sup>12</sup> A student of Turkish affairs who joined the bandwagon of van Bruinessen, Gunther, Hyman, and Olson, was Hakan Yavuz who declared, 'Modern republic treated ethno-religious diversity as a threat to its project of nation-building, and it used every means at its disposal to eliminate the causes and consequences of differences'.<sup>13</sup> Hugh Poulton, too, has attempted to explain the Kurdish question in Turkey in terms of an 'ethnic model' – or 'state repression of all expression of a separate Kurdish national consciousness'.<sup>14</sup> One comes across similar views even in otherwise commendable works on the Kurdish question, such as that of Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth Winrow. They have argued that from the 1920s to the 1940s, certain conditions made it 'exceedingly difficult for decision-makers in Ankara to pursue a policy based on real civic integration as opposed to ethnic nationalism'.<sup>15</sup>

The argument that in Turkey there has been a tendency to adopt the policy of disregarding the Kurds altogether does not seem to be persuasive. The views on the state-Kurd relation in Turkey along the lines Bruneissen,

Gunther, Olson and others suggested, had been entertained in that country only by a few intellectuals in the decade of 1900–1910 and the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>16</sup> As such, it could hardly be considered as the ‘standard’ position of the Turkish state on the Kurdish issue.<sup>17</sup> Those views can also be not valid in respect to each and every decade of the Republican period (1923 to the present). Both in the early 1920s, the 1990s and later, the state *openly* recognized the distinct Kurdish identity.<sup>18</sup>

The assumption that the founders of Turkey wished to see that country populated only by ethnic Turks, not surprisingly, led several students of the Kurdish issue to attribute to the founders of the Republic the intention of forging such a Turkey: James Brown stated that, ‘the creation by Atatürk of a secular and purely Turkish state was nurtured by the Kemalist ideology of Republican Turkey’s national unity and territorial integrity’.<sup>19</sup> Philip Robins has made a similar argument: ‘The presence of ... a large minority in Turkey [the Kurds] has exposed a serious contradiction in the Kemalist ideology.’<sup>20</sup> Henry Barkey and Graham Fuller concluded that in the post-1923 period, ‘The Kurds, who as Muslims had been equals in the Ottoman state, confronted a nationalist regime determined to assimilate them into a Turkish nation, using both education and military force’ and that the goal was ‘to make a Kurd into a Turk’.<sup>21</sup>

It has also been asserted that the goal of forging one community-turned-nation-state derived from the founders’ view that in Turkey, only one ethnic community – Turkish ethnic community – existed. Along those lines, Ayla Kılıç contended that ‘with the foundation of the Turkish Republic, ... Kurdish intellectuals ... felt betrayed by the new interpretation of “populism” (*halkçılık*). ... [The latter] became the ideological justification of Turkish nationalism and denied the existence of a separate Kurdish identity’. James Brown also claimed, though in a round about way, that the Turkish state had overlooked the existence of Kurdish identity in that country: ‘The myth perpetuated in the past that the Kurds were errant Turks who should regain their Turkishness, either through assimilation or if necessary by force, is no longer a viable strategy’.<sup>22</sup>

It was highly unlikely that the founders of Turkey toyed with the idea of a Turkey populated only by ethnic Turks. Throughout the Ottoman period, the Turks had constituted one ethnic community among several ethnic communities. In the last century of that period – the nineteenth century – the Turks could not even make head or tail of the emerging nationalist movements in their country until rather late in the game. The Turks did not even call themselves ‘Turks’ and their country ‘Turkey’ before 1920. Furthermore, until the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, officially, and after that date for some time, unofficially, religion (Islam) was considered to have constituted the major bond among the people in Turkey. How, under the circumstances, Muslim Turks could ‘deny’ the existence of the Kurds, who were Muslims like themselves, and who, both during the Ottoman period and

during the Turkish War of Independence, had served the country and the state not unlike the Turks, is a critical question that the students of ethnic conflict in Turkey subscribing to the present paradigm would be hard pressed to answer in a persuasive manner. Here it should also be kept in mind that in the Ottoman period the state had allowed the non-Muslim minorities to learn and practice their religions freely.<sup>23</sup>

After having made the assumptions that (1) the founders of the Turkish state set for themselves the goal of developing a nation made up of only one ethnic community, and (2) in the process, they had denied the existence of other ethnic communities, the above students of the Kurdish issue arrived at the conclusion that the state would resort to the forceful assimilation of the still unassimilated. In this context, Kılıç has argued that 'the cornerstone of the assimilation policy [pursued by the state] was to keep the [southeastern] region [of Turkey] underdeveloped'. Here, she has drawn upon the views of Chief of the General Staff Field Marshal Fevzi Çakmak in respect to the question at hand: 'According to Field Marshall Çakmak, the mastermind of this policy, economic development and wealth would accelerate the level of consciousness and thus lead to the development of nationalism among the Kurds'.<sup>24</sup> Along the same lines, Michael Gunther has thought that the purpose behind banishing Kurds to the western parts of Turkey (after the Shaikh Said rebellion [1925] was crushed), was to dilute the Kurdish population in order to facilitate their 'forceful assimilation'.<sup>25</sup>

Those who have come up with such views seem to have overlooked several non-ethnic factors, which together hampered the socio-economic development of the southeast. Starting with the 1933 Five-Year Industrialization Plan, the Republican leaders, in fact, acted on the assumption that the resolution of the 'southeastern question' depended upon the 'socioeconomic development' and 'modernization' of the region.

It is true that in the end, the region could not be developed adequately. This was not, however, due to the discriminatory policies on the part of state vis-à-vis that part of the country: First, since the enactment of the Land Code in 1858, large tracts of land were concentrated in the hands of a few local notables, particularly in the east and the southeast of Turkey. Those local notables have not been interested in increasing productivity in agriculture. Secondly, historically, the western parts of the country were provided with the necessary infrastructure by some Western countries, which were interested in importing raw material from those regions. In later periods, this development worked against the other regions, especially the east and the southeast. Thirdly, the United States' Chester Railway Project (1908–1913) and Germans' Berlin-Baghdad Railway Project (1914–1989) could not be completed, because the former was dropped by the Americans when the Mosul region remained in the hands of the British, who also blocked the Berlin-Baghdad Railway Project for they had their own eyes on the resources of the Middle East. The Russians, too, hindered the part of the

Berlin–Baghdad railway project because the construction of railroads into the northeast and Caucasus would have helped the Ottomans to more effectively defend themselves against the planned Russian invasion. Fourthly, in the early decades of the Republic, Chief of the General Staff Field Marshal Fevzi Çakmak had hampered investments in border areas, including the southeast, because ‘it would have been difficult to defend them.’ And lastly, the post-1960 five-year plans had placed emphasis on industrialization; this policy adversely affected the fortunes of the east and the southeast, which depended upon agriculture. Under the circumstances, it became difficult to attract private sector investments to the east and southeast. This has resulted in the relative impoverishment of the southeast, despite the fact that the public funds channeled to the area were greater than those set aside for several other regions. If, for the 1983–1992 period, per capita investment index for Turkey was 100, the same index was 36 for the Black Sea region, 71 for the (most developed) Marmara Sea region, and 256 for the southeastern region.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, during the protracted periods of ‘troubles’, the investments in the region virtually came to a standstill: the number of projects started at the time was reduced, and those that got under way could not be completed because of the Kurdish separatist terror. The terror in question was directed at virtually everybody who did not side with the terrorists. Civil servants did not want to serve in the area because of the terror threat.

More generally, before, during, and after the ‘troubles’ of the 1920s–1930s and 1980s–1990s, the state has not resorted to forceful assimilation of the Kurds, because the founders of the state had been of the opinion that for long centuries, both Turks and Kurds in Turkey, particularly the latter, had gone through a process of *acculturation*, or steady disappearance of cultural distinctiveness as a consequence of a process of *voluntary*, or rather *unconscious*, assimilation.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the state had come to the conclusion that over time there had developed a great deal of cultural similarity between the Kurds and the Turks. Thus when the Kurds rebelled, for reasons that the state thought could not be ethnic,<sup>28</sup> the state reversed its earlier policy of recognizing the distinct Kurdish ethnicity, and pursued a new strategy of the *non-recognition* of the ethnic distinctiveness of the Kurds in the hope that by this strategy it could arrest a de-acculturation process on the part of the Kurds, and reactivate the earlier acculturation process.<sup>29</sup>

There is a basic difference between ‘denial; and ‘non-recognition’: in denial, there is a refusal to accept the empirical reality; in non-recognition, there is an acceptance of empirical reality, while not admitting it openly. Thus, when one denies Kurdish identity, one would endeavour to assimilate the unassimilated or inadequately assimilated. When one chooses not to recognize the Kurdish identity, one would not reject the fact that there exists a Kurdish identity; one only hopes that that identity would not become the primary ethnic identity of the Kurds and that it remains as their secondary identity. Consequently, the rationale behind non-recognition is



that of trying to hinder the de-acculturation of the already acculturated, not that of assimilating people who are non-acculturated.

The failure to make the crucial distinction between the processes of assimilation and of attempting to prevent a de-acculturation from taking place, have led some students of Turkey to attribute less than valid intentions to rulers in that country. Heinz Kramer, otherwise an astute observer of Turkish affairs, also seems to have fallen into this trap. Kramer has made the following observation: 'Since the founding of the republic, which had been brought about with the significant assistance of Kurdish tribes during Atatürk's war of independence, the Kemalist state elite has stubbornly defended the doctrine of the unity and indivisibility of the Turkish state, its territory, and its people. ... According to the doctrine, there are only one homogeneous people in Turkey; it comprises the totality of the country's citizens who all enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations. Claims based on ethnic difference are unjustified because every Turkish citizen is a first-class citizen, a sentiment that has become the established reason for politicians and state officials to refuse Kurdish demands for minority rights'.<sup>30</sup> What can be problematic about this argument is first the claim that, according to the Kemalist doctrine, there was only one homogeneous people in Turkey; secondly, and more significantly, the very logic behind that statement: if the Kurds had felt themselves ethnically so different and whimsically discriminated against by the Turks so that they would have asked for 'minority rights', the Kurds would have taken advantage of the rather vulnerable position of the Turks in the immediate afterwards of the First World War, but, as noted earlier, they did not. In other words, would not the theory of acculturation rather than that of forceful assimilation provide a better explanation for what had transpired in the wake of the First World War?

Elsewhere in his work, Kramer has reported that 'When, in August 1984, the PKK [the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party] attacked two stations of the gendarmerie, nobody thought it would be the beginning of a protracted military confrontation between the state's forces and Kurdish guerillas [*sic*] that would lead to a deep rift in Turkish society'.<sup>31</sup> Here also, Kramer does not raise a crucial question: why did nobody in Turkey imagine that the attack in question was the harbinger of the worst to come if the Turks and the Kurds in that country had always had a deep ethnic cleavage between them, and, therefore, had developed an intense hostility and suspicion against each other?

In Turkey, as compared to those who live on the plains, the Kurds, who live in the mountains, have not intermingled with the Turks to any great extent. The tribal social structure of the area also rendered difficult the acculturation of the citizens.<sup>32</sup> This would have been an exacerbating factor for the presumed intense hostility to turn Turkey into another Northern Ireland – the country becoming a scene of intermittent bloody communal confrontations

between the Turks and the Kurds. This, too, did not happen. Contrary to Kramer's contention, despite the fact that the armed struggle between the state and the PKK led to an estimated total loss of at least 35,000 lives, it has not on the whole led to a generalized intense hostility on either side.

This was why whenever the armed struggle between the Kurdish separatists and the government forces seemed to have petered out, the state's rigid approach to the Kurdish question became mellowed. The banishment of Kurds to the western parts of Turkey during the times of 'troubles' were efforts at re-acculturation rather than (forceful) assimilation; after all, the Kurdish leaders were sent to those places with their families and, after a while, they were allowed to return to their hometowns.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Gunther has talked of the 'impressive[ness] of the relative leniency ... [the military government in 1980] showed toward those accused of terrorism and separatism'.<sup>34</sup> As Kramer himself pointed out in 1991, the use of the Kurdish language in public was allowed once more, and the state adopted a more strict definition of the 'separatist propaganda'; and, as Kramer has also shown, from 1995 onwards, the public discussion of the 'Kurdish problem' did not (almost always) automatically constitute a legal offence.<sup>35</sup> Most significantly, from the early 1990s onwards, the state began again to publicly recognize the ethnic identity of the Kurds.

It is in order to give a few more examples for substantiating the argument of this essay that the studies of ethnic conflict in Turkey need to go through a paradigmatic shift. In 1997, Marvine Howe has reported that for her, the 'most astonishing change, after all the years of death and destruction, was the attitude of the Kurds. They no longer appeared to be afraid to say they are Kurds or speak Kurdish, or openly demand rights for themselves'. Howe indicated this was 'clear from chance conversations in restaurants, cafés, and the bazaar as well as meetings at Kurdish organizations'; 'people [in general] could [now] raise the Kurdish question without automatically being punished'.<sup>36</sup> In 2001, Stephen Kinzer corroborated Howe's observations: 'Despite the years of conflict between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, [today] Turks and Kurds live together peacefully in cities and towns all over Turkey, often barely conscious of each others backgrounds, and intermarry frequently. During the war [sic], it was considered treasonous for any Turk to express any sympathy for Kurdish demands, but as the fighting died down, some in the Turkish establishment finally felt able to sympathize openly with their Kurdish cousins. Not simply university professors and other intellectuals but ordinary people have begun to view the Kurdish issue more dispassionately'.<sup>37</sup>

Howe and Kinzer's observations support the present argument. However, Howe's conclusions, at the same time, indicate that she too has a picture of two communities always in deep conflict. This was not surprising since she also thought that 'Atatürk's policy could be summed up in one word: [forceful] assimilation. Those who refused were dealt with forcefully . . . Kurdish revolts were brutally repressed'.<sup>38</sup>

In his turn, Kinzer is also of two minds: 'A reasonable case can be made that the war was the fault of Kurdish fanatics who roused their people to pointless rebellion and massacred all who stood in their way. An equally credible case might hold that the Turkish state was responsible because it oppressed the Kurds for years and gave them no choice but revolution'.<sup>39</sup> The first part of Kinzer's observation – what the Kurds did and whether or not it was a justified move on their part – does not lie within the scope of this essay. As for the second part of his argument; that the state, by the harsh policies it pursued, left Kurds with no other option but to revolt, one may argue that the suggested scenario could hardly have taken place: if the Turkish state had oppressed the Kurds for years and thus had given them no choice but 'revolution', how could the tables be turned overnight so the Turks and Kurds would start living in a harmonious manner so quickly? It is a well known fact that on the whole, ethnic hatred tends to linger on for quite long periods of time.

Not unlike Kramer, Barkey and Fuller, too, have subscribed to the present paradigm, and thus they have also overlooked the important distinction between forced assimilation and attempts to prevent a de-acculturation from taking place, and consequently they, also, have found the state's policies inconsistent. Barkey and Fuller wrote: The 'Kemalist nationalism [of the state in Turkey] had many internal contradictions. Not only did it discourage interest in "Turks" living in other parts of the world, primarily Central Asia, but it also encouraged a dual understanding of Turkishness, both civic and ethno-national. Its civic character made possible the rise [in society and politics] of assimilated Kurds, while its ethno-cultural aspect formed the basis of forced assimilation and repression of those who refused to accept the "higher" Turkish identity'.<sup>40</sup>

The founders of the Republican Turkey did discourage interest in Turks living outside Turkey, because they did *not* subscribe to ethnic nationalism. The motto of the founders of the state was 'Peace at home and peace abroad' and they diligently conformed to that doctrine when they did not face a serious threat to the territorial integrity of their country. There was no need for the civic characteristic of Turkishness to facilitate the rise in society and politics of the Kurds; in 'normal times', the Kurds could have risen in society and politics in any case because the Kurds had gone through an acculturation process. After all, only during the periods of 'troubles', while Turkishness continued to have its civic character (according to the 1924 Constitution), some restrictions *were* brought to the Kurds' taking up jobs in government. Finally, the term 'ethno-cultural' as used by Barkey and Fuller is a term in contradiction. Ethnic nationalism and cultural nationalism are two distinct phenomena. The markers of ethnic nationalism are religion and/or language, when those markers are used in a discriminatory manner towards some people(s); the cultural nationalism is premised on a constellation of ideals, values, and attitudes that together

contribute to the maintenance of national unity and territorial integrity of a given country.

Here, it should be noted that religion would come into the picture in different ways in ethno-nationalism and cultural nationalism: in ethno-nationalism, religion itself would constitute one of the markers; in cultural nationalism the constellation of ideals, values, and attitudes that make that nationalism may be derived partly or wholly from religion. In the Turkish case, the 'ethno-cultural aspect' that Barkey and Fuller have mentioned, could *not* form the basis of 'forced assimilation and suppression' because the Turkish nationalism was not ethnic nationalism. Cultural nationalism could not lead to 'forced assimilation and suppression', because the Turks and the Kurds had gone through a long process of mutual acculturation, manifesting in the process similar ideals, values, and attitudes and, therefore, there was no reason for the Turks to try to assimilate the Kurds.

On the other hand, in the Turkish case, at least in practice, the cultural nationalism did form the basis of the Turks' view about the reactive de-acculturation process on the part of the Kurds; the Turks came to the conclusion that the Kurds had tended to stray away from the ideals, values, and attitudes 'that they had come to share with the Turks', i.e., instead of stressing their similarity with the Turks, as they had done before, they had started to emphasize their distinctiveness from the Turks. The Turks figured that, as a consequence, the Kurds could attribute 'undue' significance to their secondary identity as ethnic Kurds and that in the process, their secondary identity could replace 'their generic primary identity of being a Turk'.

There are further students of Turkey who cannot make head or tail of some of the policies pursued by the Turkish state regarding the 'Kurdish issue' and who, consequently, find them paradoxical. This is again basically because they subscribe to the assimilation-resistance-assimilation paradigm. Entassar has found the Turks' approach to the Kurdish insurgency as 'two-pronged' [read, 'perplexing']: 'On the one hand, the government has sought to pacify the Kurdish population by directing more economic aid to southeastern Turkey to revive its economy ... and by integrating the local Kurdish economy into the mainstream Turkish economy . . . . On the other hand, the government has continued to implement harsh measures against those promoting ethnic nationalism in an effort to destroy Kurdish ethnic identity.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Charles MacDonald has observed that, 'Kurds working within the political system can rise to prominence, but Turkey also worked to destroy the Kurdish ethnic identity'.<sup>42</sup>

What is overlooked here is that the governments in Turkey behaved in a harsh manner to those whom they had perceived as culprits regarding the de-acculturation process among the Kurds. On the other hand, the Turks tried to develop the southeast of Turkey socio-economically, because they wished to act in an egalitarian manner to everybody in Turkey. Kurds working in the political system could rise to prominence because they were not

considered significantly different from the Turks concerning their ideals, values, and attitudes. Consequently, the Turks did *not* 'work to destroy the Kurdish ethnic identity'; the Turks only attempted to put an end to the intensification of ethnic identity among the Kurds, and they endeavoured to do that only during, and for some time after, the periods of 'troubles'.

## The present essay

Depending upon whether one studies the state-Kurds relationship in Turkey in terms of the present paradigm or, alternatively, with a view to the alternative paradigm proposed here, one would make different assumptions on three matters significant for the present purpose. First, those who subscribe to the present paradigm would take it for granted that both the Turks and the Kurds define themselves exclusively in ethnic terms and, therefore, assume that a deep conflict had been, and continues to be, inevitable between those two ethnic groups. Those who find merit in the alternative paradigm would assume that due to the centuries-old mutual acculturation on the part of the Turks and the Kurds, what those two peoples would end up sharing between them would be greater than on what they differ and that, consequently, for the latter students of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, ethnicity would not be considered as the primary cause of the 'troubles'.

Secondly, within the framework of the present paradigm one would assume that the 'troubles' between the state and the Kurds occurred because the state decided to forcefully assimilate the Kurds. Within the framework of the alternative paradigm, the starting point of the 'troubles' would be thought to be the moment of Kurds, or rather some militants thereof, who for one reason or another, but not for ethnic reasons, became dissatisfied with the pattern of relations they have had with the state.

Thirdly, the proponents of the present paradigm would argue that the state resorted to forceful assimilation in order to assimilate the Kurds. The proponents of the alternative paradigm would suggest that what passes as assimilation has, in fact, been non-recognition, or an effort to prevent a deacculturation process from taking place so that the Kurds would not again begin to think and act only in terms of their secondary ethnic identity.

All in all, those who study the Kurdish issue within the framework of the present paradigm would assume that the state in Turkey has always considered the Kurds an incorrigible group that could not by its own volition become more like the Turks. Also, when one looks at the situation in Turkey from the perspective of the present paradigm one would arrive at the conclusion that the Republican state subscribed to ethnic nationalism; consequently, one would come to the conclusion that the state could only resort to forceful assimilation of the Kurds. Consequently, those who have adopted the present paradigm would set for themselves the task of discovering in each and every case a non-sympathetic, if not hostile, act against the Kurds

committed by the state and perceive all such 'evidence' as part and parcel of the general strategy of forceful assimilation.

In contrast, those students of the Kurdish issue that work with the alternative paradigm would assume that, in the view of the state, the Turks and the Kurds, along with every other element of Turkish polity and society, have gone through a long process of mutual acculturation and, therefore, came to share a constellation of common ideals, values, and attitudes. Consequently, these students would assume that when the state was faced with 'troubles' in its relations with the Kurds, the state would not resort to a strategy of forceful assimilation; instead, the state would tend to give Kurds the benefit of the doubt, and that, at most, the state would try to prevent Kurds from going through a de-acculturation process.

The chapters that follow, being informed by the alternative paradigm, address themselves to the following general queries: (1) how the state in Turkey viewed its Kurdish subjects/citizens in different periods and why; (2) what kinds of threats the state thought it faced from its Kurds in some periods, and (3) which strategies of conflict management it adopted when it felt itself under threat.

With a view to those general queries, Chapter Two inquires whether, in the Ottoman period, the Turks had a tradition of assimilating peoples under their suzerainty. Chapter Three traces relations between the state and Kurds in the Ottoman period. Chapter Four seeks to find out how the Turks reacted to rising nationalism during the nineteenth century. These three chapters aim to display what kind of a state-Kurd relationship the Republic set up in 1923, inherited from the Ottoman period (circa 1290–1918). Chapter Five investigates Turkish nationalism in the Republican period. Chapter Six presents the perception of the Republican state vis-à-vis the Kurds. Chapter Seven takes up the two crucial rounds of 'troubles' in the Republican era. Chapter Eight provides some general remarks.

The present essay does *not* address itself to the question of whether or not the state's perception of the 'Kurdish question' *did* fit the empirical reality. After all, what shapes thought and action is the *perception* of the empirical reality, and not the objective empirical reality. The essay, however, takes up some developments that would have made at least some impact on the perception of the state in respect to the Kurdish issue. The present essay does not aim to assign guilt among the Turks and the Kurds for what transpired before, during, and after the times of 'troubles'; rather, to the extent possible in an essay of this type, it makes an effort to find out: what really happened and why? In any case, both in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, the Turks and the Kurds always constituted integral parts of the social and political bodies, and their destinies turned out to be intertwined.

# 2

## Tolerance as Acceptance

Was the Ottoman Empire an appropriate milieu for pursuing the forced assimilation of marginal groups? Did one encounter in that realm a dominant majority that was not comfortable with the existence of minorities? Did the Ottoman state's pattern of dealing with its different subjects include ethnic engineering? Did the Ottoman state aim at unity within diversity or did it try to achieve unity by turning difference into sameness? All in all, was the Ottoman world prone to be engaged in the forced assimilation of the 'other'? This chapter addresses itself to these and related issues.

### **A hybrid society and polity**

Not unlike other peoples, the Turks, throughout their history, tried hard to maintain the integrity of their realms. They, too, endeavoured not to easily let go the various ethnic elements with whom they had set up their states. On the other hand, the idea of the forced assimilation of the peoples of the realms they conquered remained alien to them. Indeed, one encounters even in their first homeland in Central Asia a *Pax Turcica* in a multi-ethnic society made up of several tribes and sedentary populations.<sup>1</sup>

One contributory factor here was that the ancient Turks adhered to a religion of peace. They had respect for the religious, cultural, and political characteristics of other communities. The Turks at the time thought of other communities and themselves together constituting a realm of peace and viewing themselves as *ihc-il* (inner realm) and other communities as *dish-il* (outer realm). 'Il' in ancient Turkish meant 'state'. An *ich-il* could not perceive others as foreign but as another *il*, which was also a temple of peace.<sup>2</sup>

It has been suggested that the Turks' ancient culture continued to have an impact on how they treated other peoples in the ensuing centuries.<sup>3</sup> It has also been argued that the granting of extraordinary concessions by Turks to the communities, comprising peoples who lived and traded in the Ottoman Empire, under the name of capitulations was a consequence of the internationalism that they subscribed to. Also, the fact that the Turks' God of

Heavens (*Gök Tanrısı*) rewarded, not punished, is perceived to have played a role here. The Turks loved, not feared their Gods. In the process, doctrinaire religion that often leads to dogmatism remained alien to the Turks.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, when Turks became Muslims, their relatively liberal approach to religion helped the Turks to adopt sympathetic views towards those whose faith was different.

One cannot, of course, categorically claim an undisputable cause and effect relationship between the relevant Turkish phenomena in different periods separated from each other by several centuries.<sup>5</sup> One does observe, however, in different historical periods similarities between their values, attitudes, and behaviour patterns, including those related to their relationships with people different from them in several respects. One may attribute the constant reproduction of their earlier values, attitudes and behaviour patterns towards the other communities in the later periods, on the one hand, to the fact that for long centuries the Turks lived in close proximity to those communities and thus experienced a great deal of cultural give and take with them, and on the other hand, to the fact that the state had to rule a mosaic of peoples and thus could not afford to impose upon them a particular religious or ethnic garb.

Indeed, before they arrived in Anatolia, their present homeland since the twelfth century, even the Turks themselves spoke different languages and/or subscribed to different belief systems. Before the Oghuz Turks, who eventually formed the Ottoman Empire, came to Anatolia, different clans of Turks lived there as well as in the present-day Iraq and Syria. Some belonged to different forms of Christianity; others adopted Buddhism, Mandaenism, or Manichaenism at various times.<sup>6</sup> At the time, there were in Anatolia also Christians (Armenians and Greeks) and non-Turkish speaking Muslim communities (in particular Arabs, Persians, and Kurds). Consequently, the Ottoman Empire was founded in a complex ethno-religious milieu.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that the Ottoman state was not based on a commonly shared worldview, religion, and political structure. Although that state developed basically as a Muslim polity, in most parts of its European provinces the majority of the population continued to be Christians. Following the conquest of the Anatolian and Balkan regions by the Ottomans, a substantial number of Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbians remained in the Ottoman domains and participated actively in the economic and military pursuits, and even in the rule of that realm. These different Christian communities held on to the age-old traditions of Byzantino-Armenian and Byzantino-Slavic cultures; those traditions became additional features of the crucible in which the general Ottoman culture was forged.<sup>8</sup> There also took place intermarriages between the Christians and Muslims, though mostly among the families of the ruling elite. This gave rise to the emergence in the Ottoman society of a new stratum of people called *Mixobarbaroi* or *Ahriyan*. There were also a rather large group of so-called Muslims hiding their Christianity – *Cryptochistians*.<sup>9</sup>



All this was because the Ottomans *subsumed* rather than *destroyed* the communities and the states that they had subjugated to themselves. In the hands of the Ottomans, the Holy War was intended not to destroy but to bring under their control the non-Muslim peoples, and incorporate the latter into the population of the Empire. Starting with Osman I (r.1299–1324) and Orhan I (r.1324–1359), Ottoman sultans attempted to *accommodate* their Christian neighbours rather than *convert* them to Islam.<sup>10</sup> A fifteenth-century fief register of Rumelia shows that following the entry of the Christian military groups into the service of the Ottoman State, *reconciliation* and *integration*, rather than a *replacement* or *elimination*, took place. Along the same lines, the Ottoman rulers, who wanted to keep their resources intact, resorted to a policy of *istimalet*, that is, ‘tolerance and protection’ to keep the Christian peasants on their land.<sup>11</sup> Having conquered Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II (r.1444, 1451–1481), too, set his mission as ‘bringing a new life’ to the Byzantine Empire rather than annihilating it. Sultan Mehmed II welded together the traditions of the Byzantine Christianity with those of the Ottoman Islam. He had a good knowledge of Greek history, and respect and concern for his stepmother who was his father Sultan Murad II’s (r.1421–1451) half-Serbian and half-Greek wife. Mehmed II quickly appointed a new Patriarch to the Greek Church (Gennadius) and granted a new and rather liberal status to the Orthodox community,<sup>12</sup> and brought the Patriarch to the head of the Armenian Orthodox community to replace the Armenian Catholicos, who had remained outside the Ottoman dominions.<sup>13</sup>

Then and later, the Ottoman rulers maintained the conquered dynasties as vassals under their suzerainty.<sup>14</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, former Albanian, Bulgarian, and Serbian officers administered some of the fief systems in the Balkans.<sup>15</sup> Having established their Empire by uniting a basically Muslim Anatolia and the Christian Balkans under their rule, the Ottomans allowed Christians and Jews to live according to their faith, and freely exercise their religion. Theirs was a virtually cosmopolitan state, treating all creeds and ethnic groups as equally respectable to the extent it was possible under the circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

As the Ottoman state did not try to transform the culture of the realms it conquered, education was left in the hands of each community, not the state. Rather than attempting to assimilate the peoples in the conquered lands, the Ottomans tried to integrate them to the system by granting them a large degree of cultural and religious autonomy and local self-rule.<sup>17</sup> Under the Ottomans, non-Muslims had not only freedom concerning their religious activities, but they could also freely engage in trade and agricultural pursuits.

It follows that the Ottomans also did not tinker with ethnic identities. They merely managed or superseded ethnic identities by religious-political ones so that the state could establish and maintain its suzerainty on all peoples under its rule.<sup>18</sup> The measures in this regard included sedantization and resettlement, in the carrying out of which no attention was paid to the

ethnic identity of the people so uprooted. Only those who rebelled faced systematic relocation somewhere else.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, in the early modern era, the Ottoman Empire was culturally even more fragmented than the continental Europe. Following the expulsion of the Jews in the late Middle Ages and the reformations and counter reformations, most European countries were left with only small minorities. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire comprised Armenian Orthodox, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish communities of considerable sizes.<sup>20</sup> The Muslim population itself was also not homogeneous. The nomads, that is, the Kurdish tribesmen, the Turcomans, and the Arab Bedouin, led life styles at odds with those of the townsfolk. Also, the Shi'a heterodox sects, concentrated in Iraq and parts of Arabia, adhered to a form of Islam quite different from that of the Sunni Muslims.

In the times of the Ottomans, if not today, when civilizations clashed at the frontiers, the usual outcomes were syncretism and hybridization rather than the hegemony of one over the other.<sup>21</sup> After all, several customs and cults harking back to the pre-Christian period were kept alive among the peoples belonging to different religions. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Ottoman reality too was multiple in its ethnic, religious and, consequently, in its cultural dimensions.<sup>22</sup> It had come into being through the *fusion* of its constituent elements such as Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, the Oghuz Turks, and the Iranians.<sup>23</sup> In the late nineteenth century, Süleyman Nazif (1869–1927), an ardent Turkist, noted that Osman Gazi was a Turk, but that Osman Gazi's forefathers and their followers could not have founded a great state without the support of the native elements (*anasır-ı mahalliye*): 'We find among the founders of this great state, with our respect and gratitude, those whose names are unfamiliar in our language but who are familiar to our minds such as Mihal and Evrenos'.<sup>24</sup> The members of the Albanian, Armenian, Greek, and Serbian aristocracy figured prominently in the early Ottoman ruling stratum, with a number of their titles being absorbed into Turkish – *effendi*, *patrik*, *voyvoda*, and the like.<sup>25</sup> After all, a sizeable part of the early Ottoman state had first been established in the Balkans before it expanded into Anatolia. It added to its territories the Bulgarian and Serbian principalities in 1397 and 1459, respectively. Sultan Mehmed II considered himself not only Khan but also Caesar; the Turks referred to the Balkans as Rumili (Romanland).<sup>26</sup> Mehmed Sokullu had been the most well-known grand vizier at the Ottoman Court in the sixteenth century, while his brother, the monk Makarios, ruled as the Patriarch of the Serbian Church at Ipec.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Ottoman State and the Muslim Turks**

Thus, the Ottoman state was not based on one constituent element. The Kayı clan of the Oghuz, which constituted the Turkish seed, led a nomadic way of life and, as such, it could not have played a leading role in the