

Turkey's Kurdish Weltschmerz

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Turkish Kurds may soon go from being the "luckiest Kurds" in the Middle East to nearly the most politically underprivileged.

Until a few years ago, tensions between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and its opponents dominated the headlines in Ankara, and some even worried about a confrontation with the military. Today, though, Turkish domestic politics are tranquil, except for the brewing Kurdish issue.

This issue is Turkey's key challenge in 2012. Lately, tensions have been rising in the country. The police have arrested thousands of Kurdish nationalists. Some of these people are perhaps connected to the outlawed and violent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Yet, others represent the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), a legal force in the Turkish legislature that, nevertheless, refuses to condemn the PKK.

To make things worse, on Dec. 28, 2011, the Turkish military accidentally targeted a convoy of Kurdish smugglers, whom it mistook for PKK members, crossing the Turkish-Iraqi border, killing 34 of its own citizens. This killing could not have come at a worse time. Many nationalist Kurds are especially angry also since Ankara's "2010 Kurdish Opening," envisioned to grant the Kurds more rights, has failed to do so.

Any other time, Ankara could have ignored this Kurdish anger, but not today.

Until recently, Ankara could have simply told the Turkish Kurds that "they have it really good," given the country's economic boom and political liberalization as a result of European Union reforms, adding that "the Kurds should, therefore, appreciate what they have."

This can no longer be said.

For one thing, the Iraqi Kurds now have it really good as well, and many Turkish Kurds envy the autonomy enjoyed by their ethnic kin in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah of northern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds are all but independent, and Turkey's politically active Kurdish community is jealous of this. There is also economic envy. Until the past decade, Diyarbakir and other Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey appeared more prosperous than Sulaimaniyah. Today, the opposite is

true.

Ankara's recent rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds has made the Turkish-Iraqi border a line that exists only on paper. Many Turkish Kurds cross daily into northern Iraq for trading. Some receive education there, whereas others live together and marry with the Iraqi Kurds, witnessing the growth of a Kurdish state and pride nearby. The Iraqi Kurds' rise has created Weltschmerz among Turkish Kurds, who are jealous of what the Iraqi Kurds have and want even more.

The events in Syria compound Ankara's problem by increasing the Turkish Kurds' relativity-based social pain. If al-Assad falls, the Syrian Kurds will likely be endowed with some form of constitutional recognition. Even if they may not achieve the prized apple of autonomy, they will have political power and recognition -- hence, more Weltschmerz for the Turkish Kurds.

With the Iranian Kurds enjoying their own Kurdistan province, even though Iran is far from being a democracy, Turkish Kurds in the near future will go from being the "luckiest Kurds" in the Middle East to nearly the most politically underprivileged Kurds in the region.

This is where Turkey's new constitution comes in. In 2012, Turkey is to draft its first civilian-written constitution. If Ankara grasps this opportunity to create a truly liberal charter that broadens everybody's rights, including those of the Kurds, this would make Turkey's Kurds feel that once again they have it very good in Turkey.

The government may face a nationalist backlash, however, if it were to grant the Kurds exclusive group rights, a step that most Turks would see as giving into demands propagated by the violent PKK. Hence, the new constitution ought to focus on widely broadening individual rights instead of assigning group rights to the Kurds or others.

And that would be good for all Turks because the current military-written constitution reads like a boarding school's "don't do" list. Not just the Kurds, but Turks of all stripes need a fresh constitution that lists their freedoms, and just that. This is the best way to make Turkey a liberal democracy. It is also the best fit for Kurdish Weltschmerz.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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