

Dangerous Violence: Turkey's Emerging Ethnic Fault Line

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Articles & Testimony

Rising social violence between Kurds and non-Kurds in Turkey, with daily incidents occurring, is an unusual, and therefore alarming, phenomenon. This violence has been spurred as much by the recent Kurdish opening, which has created a backlash against Kurdish nationalism, as it has been by the closing of the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party, or DTP, which has, in turn, triggered a second wave of violence.

How the Turkish government deals with the rising violence associated with the Kurdish problem might make or break Turkey. It will take an individualistic, European approach to deescalate the violence, as well as resolve the Kurdish issue to the benefit of the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and Turkey as a whole.

Turkey's recent Kurdish opening envisaged bringing members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, back to Turkey from the organization's bases in Iraq and cells in Europe through an unofficial amnesty. This approach, however, backfired when 34 returnees who the Turkish government had allowed into the country from Iraq delivered fiery speeches in support of the terrorist group at "heroes welcome" parties thrown by Kurdish nationalists and PKK sympathizers. Speaking at an Oct. 19 rally in Diyarbakir, group members said they had returned to Turkey not to take advantage of the AKP's amnesty, but rather to represent the PKK. They added that they had no remorse for their past actions, including violence, and made political demands on the government.

These demonstrations, and images of individuals involved in terror attacks walking freely in Turkey, have touched a raw nerve among the Turkish public. The government has since backed down, calling off its plan to bring more PKK members back to Turkey, and the Kurdish opening has flopped.

The cause of the Kurdish flop can be traced to the AKP's ethnicity-based approach to Kurdish conciliation. The AKP has, thus far, dealt with the Kurdish issue by giving ethnic-group rights to the Kurds, viewed by many as challenging the fundamental notion of Turkishness. Indeed, solving the Kurdish problem in Turkey requires recognizing what it truly means to be a Turk -- someone defined by a historic Turkish identity rather than ethnicity. Turkey is an amalgam of various Muslim ethnic groups, including Kurds as well as Bosniacs, Crimean Tatars, Albanians, Circassians, Abkhazes, Georgians, Arabs, Macedonian-, Serbian-, Bulgarian- and Greek-speaking Muslims and ethnic Turks, among others.

Turkey is therefore a non-ethnic, historic entity -- a product of the country's Ottoman past. For 500 years, the Ottoman Empire treated its entire Muslim population as members of the same political grouping, the Muslim "millet," imprinting on its Muslim population an indelible collective identity. In the 20th century, this ecumenical notion of the Muslim millet evolved into the equally comprehensive idea of Turkey, as members of the former Muslim millet in Turkey came to see themselves as Turks, regardless of their ethnic background.

Despite a violent challenge by the PKK in the name of Kurdish nationalism, the historic Turkish amalgam has, thus far, remained intact: Kurds continue to intermarry with non-Kurds in large numbers and live in ethnically mixed neighborhoods and cities. A 2009 poll by SETA and Pollmark, an Istanbul-based think tank and polling firm, respectively, provides plenty of evidence of the close social proximity between Kurds and non-Kurds in Turkey: For example, 67 percent of Kurds polled said they have close non-Kurdish relatives.

Now, though, this amalgam seems to be coming undone amid rising social violence between Kurds and non-Kurds. Never before had Kurds and Turks targeted one another on the basis of ethnicity, but now there are signs that a violent ethnic fault line is emerging between the two groups. Turkey today stands at a crucial turning point, triggered in part by the challenge to the amalgam that the Kurdish opening has posed. Public resentment is rising among the non-Kurdish population toward the Kurds due to this very measure, which many people see as an act of giving in to the PKK, viewed as a terrorist group. The AKP and Turkey will suffer if the party sticks to this ill-conceived, if well-intentioned, strategy.

Turkey can break the Kurdish impasse, however, by increasing the rights of all Turkish citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Instead of granting collective group rights to the Kurds, Turkey should increase the cultural and political rights of all its citizens, Kurds and non-Kurds alike. Take, for instance, broadcasting rights. The government's granting of collective Kurdish group rights foresees broadcasting in Kurdish by private TV networks. Such a step appears to grant exclusive rights to one ethnic group in Turkey. Instead, the government should consider a new broadcast law allowing citizens to broadcast in any language they wish, without mention of specific languages.

Addressing the Kurdish issue through further collective measures would be a slippery slope. Assigning exclusive, ethnicity-based group rights to the Kurds would further strengthen and solidify their Kurdish identity, increase the distance between the Kurds and the rest of the country's population and even trigger violence. For Turkey to resolve its Kurdish problem, it must not only make the Kurds happy, but also keep the entire country content regarding reforms. By adopting a 21st-century European approach to Turkey's problems, the government can do just that: increase the rights and liberties of all citizens, while upholding all citizens' equal rights.

The AKP, which promoted Turkey's bid for EU accession until 2005, has since shied away from the process, losing its popular pro-Europe brand in the West and among Turkish liberals, the party's erstwhile supporters. If the party were to re-embrace the EU process and adopt a contemporary European attitude toward the Kurdish problem, it would not only save Turkey's EU accession, break the Kurdish impasse and trump emerging violence; it would also make Turkey and save the AKP.

Instead of just a Kurdish opening, that would be an opening for all Turkish citizens.

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