'Kurdish Opening' Closed Shut

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Articles & Testimony

On Oct. 24, Kurdish migrant farm workers started a fight in the town of Ipsala, in the northwest region of Turkey. After the Kurdish workers apparently harassed local girls, some of the town's youth attacked the workers in retaliation. The conflict escalated, and the Kurdish workers were forced to take refuge in the town's mosque to avoid a growing anti-Kurdish mob. Across the country, veiled mothers, the precise constituency one would imagine to be supportive of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, protested the government's "Kurdish opening," which promises overtures toward the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist organization that has waged a 25-year struggle against Turkey.

Social violence between Kurds and non-Kurds, an unusual phenomenon in Turkey, has been spurred by the recent "Kurdish opening." How the AKP deals with the Kurdish problem will not only determine the party's political future, but also has the potential to make or break Turkey's ambitions as a regional power. It will take an individualistic, European approach to resolve the Kurdish issue to the benefit of both the AKP and Turkey as a whole.

The "Kurdish opening" envisaged bringing members of the 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 PKK members, whom the Turkish government had allowed into the country from Iraq, delivered fiery speeches in support of the terrorist group. On October 19, speaking to a rally in Diyarbakir, the party members said they had returned to Turkey not to take advantage of the AKP's amnesty, but rather to represent the PKK. The group added that they had no remorse for their past actions, including violence, and made political demands on the Turkish government.

These demonstrations, and images of individuals involved in terror attacks walking freely in Turkey, have touched a raw nerve. The government has since backed down, calling off its plan to bring more PKK members back to Turkey, and the "Kurdish opening" has flopped. Yet Turkey can still resolve this impasse. The AKP has, thus far, dealt with the issue by giving collective, ethnicity-based group rights to the Kurds. This approach has led to social backlash in Turkey for being perceived as too conciliatory to the PKK, and for challenging the notion of "Turkishness." But Turkey can break the Kurdish impasse by increasing the rights of all Turkish citizens, regardless of ethnicity and religion.

Solving the Kurdish problem in Turkey requires an understanding of the very notion of what it means to be a Turk -- someone defined by 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.

The Turkish amalgam is a non-ethnic, historic entity that is 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 its Muslim population with an indelible collective political identity. In the twentieth century, the 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 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, 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.

Collective group rights given to the Kurds would challenge the foundations of this Turkish amalgam. This is why public resentment among the non-Kurdish population -- an undertaking also seen as giving in to the PKK, widely viewed as a terrorist group -- is rising. The AKP and Turkey will suffer if the party sticks to this ill-conceived, if well-meaning, strategy.

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 collective measures would be a slippery slope. Assigning exclusive, ethnicity-based group rights to the Kurds would further strengthen and solidify their Kurdish identity, increasing the distance between the Kurds and rest of the country's population. For Turkey to resolve its Kurdish problem, it must not only make the Kurds happy, but also keep the entire country content regarding the reforms. By adopting an enlightened approach to Turkey's problems, the government can do just that: increase the rights and liberties of all citizens, while ensuring that all citizens maintain 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 21st century European attitude towards the Kurdish problem, this would not only save Turkey's EU accession, break the Kurdish impasse, and make Turkey, but also save the AKP. Instead of just a "Kurdish opening," that would be an opening for all of the Turks.

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