

# KURDS AT THE TRANSITION FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO THE TURKISH REPUBLIC

*Kurds constitute one of the largest ethnic groups without a state of their own, with an estimated population of 25 to 30 million dispersed across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This article highlights the dynamics of Kurdish autonomy during the Ottoman era and outlines the driving forces behind the assimilation policy implemented towards the Kurds by the founders of the Turkish Republic. In doing so, the article points to rising fascism in Europe, the pervasive fear of further fragmentation of the Republic, and the legacy of the Ottoman millet system.*

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**W**ith the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, the status of Kurdistan, which had been a province of the Empire, became a source of concern.<sup>1</sup> Up until that point, the Kurds had been part of the Sunni Muslim core –along with Turks and Arabs– of the multiethnic empire.<sup>2</sup> That being said, all did not necessarily go well between the Ottoman administration and the Kurdish fiefdoms. While there were minor issues throughout the imperial history, major problems arose from the middle of the 19th century onwards.

From the 16th century onwards, Kurds were treated by the Sultan as a distinct group allowed to have their own fiefdoms (provinces or emirates), and thereby were able to operate semi-autonomously in their internal affairs. The Sultan used them as safeguards for the stability of the Empire’s borders and, in return for their semi-autonomy, they provided the Sultan with taxes and soldiers.<sup>3</sup> This system survived until the 19th century without having a “national” awakening or awareness, despite some consciousness of Kurdish cultural and linguistic differences.

Early in the 19th century, new factors precipitated a change in the Kurdish-Ottoman relationship at the administrative level. The rise of Sultan-Caliph Mahmud II to the throne in 1808 changed the political landscape. Under the rule of Mahmud II, due to Western pressure in the 1820s, a series of modernizing reforms were enacted, culminating in 1839 with the *Tanzimat Fermanı*, (edict of reforms) which gave non-Muslim subjects of the Empire rights, status, and equality. The *Tanzimat Fermanı* was an attempt to “democratize” the Empire in order to quell overall unrest. At the same time, however, the Sultan-Caliph was increasingly unable to protect the economic interests of the Muslim merchants.<sup>4</sup> The ensuing unrest spread throughout Anatolia. Due to the economic and political decline of the Empire, the Sultan was determined to abolish the semi-autonomous status of the Kurdish tribes, and re-centralize the country in order to reinforce the territorial unity of the state. Thus, he sent his troops to Kurdistan to re-conquer the lands under Kurdish semi-autonomy.

With his ascension to the throne in 1876, Sultan Abdülhamid II sought to find a solution to the ongoing unrest and ensure the integrity of the Empire by reinforcing the Islamic character of the state.<sup>5</sup> He therefore ordered the creation of the Hamidiye

1 Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State – Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 2.

2 Henri J. Barkey and Graham Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 6.

3 Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 7.

4 Haldun Gülalp, “The crisis of Westernization in Turkey: Islamism versus Nationalism,” *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 8 No: 2 (1995), p. 176.

5 Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 8.

Regiments (*Hamidiye Alayları*) in the eastern provinces. This was a system of village guards comprised of Kurds who were to be deployed in case of a revolt. The system's true aim, however, was to use these newly established regiments in the Ottoman campaign against the Armenians, as Abdülhamid II feared a possible national awakening of the

Armenians in the eastern part of the State. The *Hamidiye Regiments* gave the Kurds some power –if not ethnic consciousness– within the Empire. Kurdish tribes were organized as soldiers of these regiments in order to fight against Armenian nationalism. As a result, the Regiments began to treat Armenians with violence, resulting in a deep rift between the two nations.<sup>6</sup>

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The efforts of the Ottoman Sultan to divide the Kurdish and Armenian populations of the Empire in the eastern provinces were mostly successful, along with the imperial interventions in the Kurdish regions in order to levy taxes. However, this brought about one of the most prominent Kurdish revolts of the 19th century, the Revolt of Sheikh Ubeydullah of 1880, which can be considered one of the first nationalist awakenings of the Kurdish movement. Sheikh Ubeydullah was an important religious leader of the Kurdish tribes living in Şemdinli, Hakkari. He soon realized that the Kurdistan policy of the Ottoman Empire was to pit the tribes against each other.<sup>7</sup> Sheikh Ubeydullah denounced the conduct of the Ottoman Sultan towards Armenians and tried to warn Kurds against this divisive policy. He revolted against Ottoman rule for its imperialistic policies, but also in order to create an independent chieftainship that would take over the authority of the Ottoman government to collect taxes in the Kurdish regions.<sup>8</sup> Sheikh Ubeydullah's uprising was followed by other revolts like those of Mir Mehmet Pasha of Rewanduz and Bedirhan Bey of Cizre, both of whom were leaders of historically prominent Kurdish tribes. Since they could be mainly characterized as more religious, these revolts do not qualify

6 The non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire were a class who was successful in business, holding the reins of the economy and trade in their hands. This was one of the reasons for which the Muslims of the Empire, especially the Kurds, viewed Armenians with hostility. They longed to possess Armenians' goods and wanted to take over their economic supremacy. Moreover, with the Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, the protection of Armenians and the reforms in the lands where Armenians predominantly lived were put under guarantee. The Hamidiye Regiments were thus an excuse for Kurds to mistreat the Armenians and to drive them out of the regions that they considered Kurdish. When the Armenians revolted in 1894 at the Sason Rebellion, for instance, Hamidiye Regiments repressed the rebellion with brutality. In 1895-1896, the Ottoman administration had the Armenians killed by its own troops and Hamidiye Regiments. See: Naci Kutlay, *İttihat Terakki ve Kürtler* [Union and Progress and Kurds] (İstanbul: Dipnot, 2010), pp. 37-54.

7 Wadie Jwaideh, *Kürt Milliyetçiliğinin Tarihi, Kökenleri ve Gelişimi* [The Kurdish National Movement, its Origins and Development] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2009), p. 176.

8 Kutlay (2010), pp. 54-55.

exactly as nationalistic. There were a total of 50 Kurdish rebellions against the Ottoman Empire in the imperial period.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Kurds Under the Rule of the Committee of Union and Progress***

The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP – *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) was created under these circumstances in 1889, in Istanbul by five students of medicine, two of who were Kurdish. The Committee later transformed into a political party and aligned itself with the Young Turks in 1906, a nationalist wing of the CUP.

It is during this period, precisely in 1898, that the first Kurdish national newspaper, *Kürdistan*, was published by Kurdish exiles in Cairo.<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, *Kürdistan* sided with the Young Turks who, since the collapse of the 1876 Constitutional system, had been attempting to solve the crisis of the Empire and denounce the pan-Islamist politics led by Sultan-Caliph Abdülhamid II.<sup>11</sup> The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 replaced Sultan Abdülhamid II's Islamic vision with secularism and constitutionalism, and an atmosphere of liberalism began to reign in the country. Kurdish intellectuals, who regained hope with this wave of liberalism, viewed this new political context as the best environment in which to achieve greater autonomy and accordingly began to increase their nationalist activities.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the first nationalist organization –the *Kurdish Society for the Rise and Progress*– was formed in 1908. Kurdish nationalist activities were repressed, however, as early as 1910. Further, whereas Kurds and Kurdish elites had played important roles in the Young Turk movement and within the CUP, Turkish nationalism, in its reinvigorated form, began to dominate the Party.

Following the Revolution of 1908, but notably from 1910 onwards, the Young Turks and the CUP began to implement a Turkification policy. The prominent leaders of the Kurdish Society for the Rise and Progress were sentenced to capital punishment, and were forced to flee the country. One member of the Bedirhan dynasty involved in publishing the newspaper *Kürdistan* was exiled abroad. All of the Kurdish schools in Istanbul, which were authorized under the rule of Abdülhamid II, were closed down in 1909. These Turkification policies incited more Kurdish elites to start creating new Kurdish nationalist newspapers, societies, and committees after World War I. The Party of Kurdish Nation (*Kürt Millet Fırkası*), the first Kurdish political party, was founded in this period.<sup>13</sup>

9 Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 7.

10 Headquarters of the publication were later transferred to Geneva and then to England. Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 8

11 Paul J. White, "Citizenship under the Ottomans and Kemalists: How the Kurds Were Excluded", *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.3 No:1, (1999), p. 78.

12 Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 8.

13 Jwaideh (2009), p. 211.

Despite these Turkification policies and repression, Kurds fought alongside the Ottoman armies during World War I, which the Young Turks had dragged the country into.<sup>14</sup> Most of the Kurds in rural areas, however, sided with the Sultan-Caliph because of what he represented religiously. Thus, they were lined up against the Young Turks. This factor added intensity to the Turkification policies of the CUP, which distanced itself from Islam and adopted a Western and secular position. Meanwhile, Kurdish nationalist ideas began to be spread in the *Tekkes* (lodges) by religious Kurds, mostly by the Sheikhs who formed a crucial part of Kurdish elites.<sup>15</sup> These Kurdish elites demanded reforms from the Young Turk government, including the adoption of Kurdish as the official language in five Kurdish districts and as the language of instruction in Kurdish regions, the appointment of officials who spoke Kurdish, the application of Shariah rules in judicial and legal affairs, and the use of tax income for the rehabilitation of roads in the Kurdish regions.<sup>16</sup> From this point of view, it would not be incorrect to state that the Kurdish demands of the last century do not differ significantly from those of today.

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### ***Kurds During the Founding of the Turkish Republic***

The Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic state with different nations living under its jurisdiction. Its system was based on the concept of *millet*, which referred to first religious, and then ethno-religious groups. However, the interpretation of the Treaty of Lausanne did not recognize any groups other than non-Muslims as *minorities*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the new republic essentially rejected the existence of the Kurds. Furthermore, the societal structure of Kurds living in the rural areas of southeast Turkey was not compatible with the project of modern Turkey, since it was still a feudal system – a remnant of the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish societal structure was consequently seen as archaic and conservative; hence the new and modern Turkish state had to sever its links with this old system, which was incompatible with the rationale of the young republic.<sup>18</sup>

14 Barkey and Fuller (1998), p. 9.

15 Jwaideh (2009), p.212.

16 Jwaideh (2009), p.213.

17 Samim Akgönül, *Türkiye Rumları* [Turkey Greeks] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008), p. 70.

18 Bahar Şahin, “Türkiye’nin Avrupa Birliği Uyum Süreci Bağlamında Kürt Sorunu: Açılımlar ve Sınırlar,” [Kurdish Problem within the context of Turkey’s EU Adaptation Process: Openings and Limitations] in Ayhan Kaya and Turgut Tarhanlı (eds.), *Türkiye’de Çoğunluk ve Azınlık Politikaları: AB Sürecinde Yurttaşlık Tartışmaları* [Politics of Majorities and Minorities: Citizenship Discussions in the EU process] (İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2005), p. 125.

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nic, and religious distinctions and to construct a Western-style nation, based upon an individual and juridical affiliation and not upon the conglomeration of ethno-confessional communities.

Since its foundation, the Turkish Republic has enforced a policy of assimilation towards the Kurds. There were multiple reasons for pursuing this policy. First was the legacy of the *millet* system. In the Ottoman Empire, every religion and even every confession of Christianity was a *millet*. All Muslims belonged to the same nation (*umma*). Therefore, Kurds were never considered as different from Turks, despite their different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural features. The second reason was the tradition of the CUP. From the 1910s onwards, its “Turkification” policies excluded any cultural identity other than Turkish. This homogenization policy was implemented first toward the Armenians in 1915. The Kurds were also subject to these homogenization policies because of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences.<sup>20</sup> The third reason for assimilation policies involved anxiety over the Empire’s downfall. The rapid fragmentation and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire instilled a fear in the founders of the Turkish Republic that different groups would demand further fragmentation, leaving no land for the “Turkish” people.<sup>21</sup> Lastly, the fascism prevalent in Europe in the interwar years surely had its effect on Turkey as well, as it followed the European model of nation-states. In the years between the two World Wars, in countries such as Spain, Italy, and Germany, as well as in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, nationalism was on the rise. The Turkish founding elite was

The new state had to be formed out of a single nation unified around the same language, the same culture, the same collective memory, and the same religious belonging. One of the prominent historians of Turkish history, Feroz Ahmad, points out that “Turkey was ‘made’ in the image of the Kemalist elite whose primary aim was to reach the contemporary level of civilization by creating an independent nation-state, fostering industry and constructing a secular and modern national identity.”<sup>19</sup>

The Turkish state had two objectives: to create a society without any social, eth-

19 Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 31.

20 Baskin Oran, “Thought on the State and the Kurdish Identity in Turkey”, in eds. Ole Hoiris and Sefa, (1998), p. 491.

21 Oran, (1998), p. 491.

also impressed by the slogans of these years: *Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Partei, Ein Führer!* (One nation, one state, one party, and one leader!).<sup>22</sup>

Creating a new state from the ashes of an empire was not an easy task, and co-operation was needed from the constituents. During the Independence War, Mustafa Kemal offered Kurdish tribal leaders<sup>23</sup> autonomy in exchange for their help in the independence movement.<sup>24</sup> One of Mustafa Kemal's closest military supporters, Col. Fahrettin (later General Fahrettin Altay, the renowned cavalry commander in the Turkish War of Independence), was knowledgeable about the Kurds. Fahrettin's views provide hints as to how Kurds were perceived by the Turkish cadre of that era. According to Fahrettin, "Kurds were rough diamonds (... ) they could be managed if one knew how to approach them. Civilization would come with education –in the Turkish language– and would reinforce loyalty to the Ottoman state."<sup>25</sup> The core of the Turkification policies of the future Turkish Republic was, thus, determined to be instruction in the Turkish language in order to "civilize" the Kurds.<sup>26</sup>

The first telegram from Mustafa Kemal to four Kurdish tribal leaders was sent on 28 May 1919. Other messages followed, stating that, "Kurds and Turks are true brothers and may not be separated." He also stated that he was in favor of granting all manner of rights and privileges (*hukuk ve imtiyazat*) in order to ensure the attachment [to the state] and the prosperity of their Kurdish brothers, on the condition that the Ottoman state was not split up.<sup>27</sup> On another occasion, Mustafa Kemal declared

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22 Oran, (1998).

23 Andrew Mango cites the diary Mustafa Kemal kept during World War I. According to this diary, Mustafa Kemal has his first encounter with Kurds in 1916 when he was promoted to Brigadier-General and sent to Diyarbakır. Mustafa Kemal mentions Kurds and this region in the following words "(...) They do not know Turkish. They do not understand what government means. In brief, these are places which have not yet been conquered. (...) They obey their tribal leaders and sheikhs, who are very influential in these parts". Andrew Mango, "Atatürk and the Kurds," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.35 No:4 (1999), pp. 1-25.

24 Maya Arakon, "The Making of Modern Turkey and the Structuring of Kurdish Identity: New Paradigms of Citizenship for the 21st Century" in eds. Rasim Özgür Dönmez and Pınar Enneli, *Societal Peace and Ideal Citizenship for Turkey* (Lexington Books, 2011), p. 54.

25 Mango (1999), pp. 3.

26 Mustafa Kemal and the Young Turks were inspired by Namık Kemal, the "poet of liberty." Namık Kemal had written in 1878: "while we must try to annihilate all languages in our country, except Turkish, shall we give Albanians, Lazs and Kurds a spiritual weapon by adopting their own characters? Language... may be the firmest barrier against national unity". He also said "If we set up regular schools... and carry out the programmes which are now not fulfilled, the Laz and Albanian languages will be utterly forgotten in twenty years." See: Mango, (1999) p. 4.

27 Mango (1999), p. 7.

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that, “they were always ready to provide an administration which would guarantee the prosperity and happiness of Kurdistan.”<sup>28</sup> Right after the establishment of the first Grand National Assembly in June 1920, Mustafa Kemal referred in his speeches to the forming of a local government in Kurdistan and mentioned that he would recognize the peoples’ right of self-determination.<sup>29</sup>

The commitments of Mustafa Kemal about granting autonomy to Kurdistan faded as the founding elite started their nation-building process after the liberation, and the rebellion in the Kurdish region was used to justify repression nationwide.<sup>30</sup> By the late 1920s, state historians and social scientists began to build a new ancestry for the Kurds, stating that they had descended from Turkmen tribes and, thus, were “Mountain Turks.”<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-1920s, the government had increased its employment of coercive measures. Speaking in Kurdish was banned and the juridical practices were followed by military ones, all of which came to a head with the Kurdish revolt of 1925. It was the first Kurdish revolt of the young Republic and, as Kurds “did not exist” any more, those who resisted the new regime were not presented as Kurds with an ethnopolitical cause, but as tribes and bandits who were threatened by the extent of modern state’s power in the region.<sup>32</sup>

28 The point that should be underlined here is that in his conception of a new state, Mustafa Kemal leaves out all the non-Muslim components of the country. Thus, the proclamation of the Erzurum Congress of 23 July 1919 stipulates that “all Islamic elements [i.e. ethnic communities] living in this area, are true brothers, imbued with the sentiment of mutual sacrifice and respectful of their [i.e. each other’s] racial [i.e. ethnic] and social circumstances.” Article 6 of the same proclamation extends this principle to all Ottoman territories within the lines of the armistice signed with the Allies on 30 October 1918 and states the Ottoman lands as “inhabited by our true brothers, of the same religion and race as ourselves, whom it is impossible to divide.” Mustafa Kemal brought this Islamic character of the peoples living on the Ottoman lands repeatedly in several occasions, each time underlining the “brotherhood” between Turks and Kurds, leaving other non-Muslim populations out of the scope. See: Mango (1999), p. 8.

29 Mango (1999), p. 13.

30 The Kurdish rebellions continued in the 1920s as well. The first important one was the Koçgiri rebellion of 1920, made up mainly of the Kirmancis of Dersim, the second important rebellion was that of Sheikh Said of 1925, made up mostly by Zazas. The Sheikh Said rebellion was especially hard to repress. See: Maya Arakon, “Ayrılıkçı Kürt Hareketinin tarihsel Dinamiklerine Kısa Bir Bakış,” [A Short Overview of the Historical Dynamics of the Separatist Kurdish Movement], *Alternative Politics*, Vol.2 No:2 (October 2010), pp. 175-194.

31 Houston Christopher, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish nation state* (Berg Publishers, 2001), pp. 99-101.

32 Although this was a problem that emerged in 1840 when the Ottoman Empire attempted to centralize the Kurdish emirates of the Southeast part of the country, which led to a conflict between the central government and the Kurdish emirates in 1848, the question gained new dimensions with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. For more details see: Maya Arakon (2011).



Over time, oppressive practices and assimilating policies increased to the extent that “Turkification”<sup>33</sup> penetrated all aspects of life – from education to culture to the economy.<sup>34</sup> From the 1930s onwards, the Turkish state thus initiated a struggle against those who would not identify themselves as Turks. This practice went as far as emptying Kurdish villages to fill them with Turkish-speaking populations and changing the Kurdish names of the villages into Turkish ones.<sup>35</sup> Turning Kurds into Turks was portrayed as a civilizing mission to eradicate tribalism and feudalism.<sup>36</sup> Between 1925 and 1938, tens of thousands of Kurds and Alevis were deported to Western Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Parts of the area were under continuous martial law from 1925 until 1946.

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### Conclusion

To reduce the Kurdish national movement to the PKK rebellion is an easy and comforting way of closing one’s eyes to the fact that Kurdish nationalism, albeit a little later than that of other aspirant nations, began to emerge from the late 19th century onwards. Kurds always had the desire to build their own nation-state in the region that they consider their homeland. Emergent Kurdish nationalism in the 20th century was not a result of the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, but a consequence of and answer to the CUP’s Turkification policies in which Young Turk leaders asserted a radical form of Turkish national identity. The modern Kemalist state, and the Turkification policies it took over from the Young Turks, ignited semi-dormant Kurdish nationalist feelings by provoking the awakening of the national consciousness among the Kurdish population. Mustafa Kemal’s empty promises of autonomy for Kurdistan elicited resentment in the *milieu* that was once unconscious.

33 Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve Türkleştirme Politikaları* [Wealth Tax and Turkification Policies] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2000) p. 78.

34 The Settlement Law of 1934, a privileged text of Turkish nationalism of the 1930s, constitutes an example in this respect.

35 Saygı Öztürk, *İsmet Paşa’nın Kürt Raporu* [İsmet Pasha’s Kurdish Report] (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2008) p. 37.

36 Samim Akgönül denotes that there have been 3 toponymic waves of change: the first is between 1930-1934, the second is between 1956-1964, and the third is between 1982-1990. For more details see: Samim Akgönül, *De la nomination en turc actuel: appartenances, perceptions, croyances* [On the Nomination of the Present-day Turk: affiliation, perceptions, beliefs] (İstanbul: Isis, 2007), pp. 94-97.

37 A religious community in Turkey that constitutes a heterodox and syncretic branch of Shiite Islam.

The invention –and imposition– of Turkish citizenship and the ban on language and practices related to Kurdish identity were perhaps the starting point of the Kurdish rebellion and the movement’s search for recognition in the Republican era. This search is likely to continue until Kurds gain official recognition of their particular identity, language, culture, and nationhood under an autonomous administrative structure within the territory of the Turkish Republic. This problem –one which marked the entire period of Middle East history– is likely to only then be resolved.