

# Mountain Turks: State ideology and the Kurds in Turkey

Ceng Sagnic<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the implementation of the Turkish state ideology as a tool for persuading and assimilating the Kurds and other ethnic and linguistic groups. Existing studies emphasize that the Kurds were subjected to a systematic forced assimilation campaign by the new Kemalist state. This paper stresses that the formation of Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is the root to understanding the ideological foundation of the Turkish state's denial of the Kurds, their history, language and even their existence. This has huge implications for Turkey's claims to secular democracy, its regional stature and aspirations to join the European Union.

## **Keywords**

State ideology, hegemony, assimilation, ethnicity, language, Ottoman Empire, Kemalism, Kurds, Turkey

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## **Introduction**

Recently, I heard a Kurdish teacher in Istanbul saying that independence for the Kurds cannot be more than a dream. Such a 'sure' statement provoked flashbacks in my mind regarding the concept of the state ideology in social sciences. True, belief in this sort of a 'certain' despair of achieving national rights must be imposed by an organized set of institutions struggled a lot to convince both the Kurds and the Turks of its superiority. Many Kurdish activists might claim that achievements of legal and illegal Kurdish political organizations' have so far proved that there is still room for Kurdish ethnic and linguistic rights in Turkey, since the common belief of impossibility of the Kurds' national independence also bear in mind a successful pacification story of a strong state ideology of denial and suppression. Loizides, Besikci, McDowall and many authors named the Turkish state's long-lasting efforts to assimilate the Kurds through using education and mass media as a process of 'Turkification'. For me, a great majority of the Kurds' faith in proclaim of the Kurds' incapability of achieving a nation-state represents the last stage of the state's homogenization policy of various ethnic groups within Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> Candidate for the International Masters of Arts Program in Middle East Studies (MAPMES), Department of Middle East Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, P.O Box 653, Beer Sheva , 84105, Israel. Sagnic obtained his BA at the Department of Politics & International Relations, University of Kurdistan-Hawler, Erbil, Iraq. Email: Cengsagnic@gmail.com

This article does not aim to say anything about whether the Kurds should have a state of their own, or not. Hence it attempts to analyze implementation of the state ideology as a tool for persuading not only the Kurds but also other ethnic and linguistic groups that the Kurds were not a nation. 'Mountain Turks', as a term long used to describe the Kurds both to the Turks and the Kurds should have been one of the best titles for such a work. Although the term was first used by an Army General, Mr. Abdullah Alpdogan, to better define indigenous 'others' who mainly live in mountainous areas and speak an 'insubstantial' language-like dialect, the concept has been expanded by numerous institutions including universities, and soon it was equipped with historical and linguistic arguments.<sup>2</sup>

For the Kurds' inconsistent life, traditions and language with the proposed goal of achieving '*one language, one flag, one nation*' within the territories saved from the so-called Western colonialism; and the young Turkish state's oneness theory, for numerous writers such as Zeydanlioglu, Besikci, Nezan and Kirisci, the Kurds were subjected to a systematic forced assimilation campaign by the new Kemalist state.<sup>3</sup> For me, a quick look at the formation of Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is essential in order to better understand the ideological foundation of the Turkish state's denial of the Kurds, their history, language and even their existence.

## State Ideology and the Kurdish Question in Turkey

Roots of the official manner of the Turkish state towards the Kurds go back to the formation of the Kemalist ideology and to the first constitution of the state in 1924. The founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal, frequently referred to the unity of interest between the Kurds and the Turks before the declaration of the new republic. For instance, Kemal emphasized: "*the loyalty of the Kurdish people has been known to us for a long time. The Kurds have always been a valuable help to the Turks. One can say that the two peoples form one.*"<sup>4</sup> Whereas, the new Kemalist state had been based on the notion of 'oneness', in other words, the Kurds' national claims had constantly been seen as a threat to the 'indivisible integrity' of Turkish lands. The young republic's constitution, state officials and even the courts denied the Kurdish ethnic identity, and the new state's policy toward the Kurds was based on denial of their language, culture, history, and continued with a systematic forced assimilation campaign through prohibiting the Kurdish language, use of the expressions of Kurds, Kurdistan, Kurdish<sup>5</sup> and deportation of Kurdish population from the south eastern Turkey to the western regions of country.<sup>6</sup> The new Turkish state constructed new *myths* claiming that Kurds were really Turks, they were a clan linked to the

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<sup>2</sup> Bayaziddi S, 2009, *Hopes of Independent Kurdistan following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire*, The Kurdish Globe, Online

<sup>3</sup> Zeydanlioglu W, "*The White Turkish Man's Burden*": *Orientalism, Kemalism and the Kurds in Turkey*, pg. 7

<sup>4</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 6

<sup>5</sup> Gurbey, G, 1996, "The Development of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey since the 1980s" in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, Robert Olson (ed.), The University Press of Kentucky, USA, pg.13

<sup>6</sup> For more information about displacement policies pursued by Turkey see: Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London

original Turkish racial origins<sup>7</sup>, or as it frequently declared by high officials they were the *mountain Turks*.<sup>8</sup>

With no doubt, the state established, supported and even used governmental and non-governmental institutions and organizations in distributing the state ideology; the Kemalist view about the Kurds. Turkish Radio and Television Establishment (TRT), Turkish Language Institution (TDK), Turkish History Institution (TTK) and other state supported and established institutions functioned as reflecting the state's views and made great efforts to produce and distribute the state's ideological propositions.<sup>9</sup> One of these institutions, the Turkish Cultural Research Institute (TKAE) has published numerous books confirming the official claims about the Kurdish entity. These publications of TKAE distributed in schools, city libraries, prisons and villages for free.<sup>10</sup> A list of some books published by this institute is provided below.

*Some Publications of the TKAE:*<sup>11</sup>

- Pasha, S. S., 1982, 'Research about Van and Turkish Kurds', Ankara
- Seferoglu, K. S., 1982, 'First Turkish Inhabitants of Anatolia: The Kurds', Ankara
- Taneri, A., 1983, 'A Turkish Clan from Turkistan: The Kurds', Ankara
- Arvasi, A. S., 1986, 'The Reality of East Anatolia', Ankara
- Mirsan, K., 1983, 'From Proto-Turkish to Today's Kurdish', Ankara
- Basbug, H., 1984, 'The First Turkish Clan: Zazas and Kurmanjs', Ankara
- Cay, A. M., 1985, 'Turkish Ergenekon Festival: Nawruz', Ankara
- Kirzioglu, F., 1964, 'The Kurds, Turkish in Every Aspect', Ankara
- Kirzioglu, F., 1968, 'Turkishness of the Kurds', Ankara
- Taneri, A., 1976, 'Kurds, Origin of Kurds, Their Political, Social and Cultural Life', Ankara
- Tefvikoglu, M., 1963, 'He is Turkish not Kurdish!', Ankara
- Gursel, I. E., 1977, 'Truth about the Kurds' Ankara

In addition to mass media's and universities' cooperative operations to prove that Turkey belonged only to Turks, state officials' self-confident statements regarding the same view also deserve attention. The former Prime Minister Ismet Inonu stated to a national newspaper claiming that: "*only the Turkish nation is entitled to claim ethnic and national rights in this country. No other element has any such right.*"<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, less than a month after the Prime Minister's statement to the newspaper *Milliyet*, the Minister of Justice Mahmut Esat Bozkurt expounded further on the theme with a new statement to the same newspaper and elucidated the new state's manner toward the 'others' who claim ethnic and national rights in Turkey. The minister defined Turkey

<sup>7</sup> Natali, D. 2005, "*The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*", Syracuse University Press, New York, pg. 78

<sup>8</sup> Gurbey, G, 1996, "The Development of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey since the 1980s" in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, Robert Olson (ed.), The University Press of Kentucky, USA, pg.13

<sup>9</sup> Besikci, I. 1991, "*Bilim-Resmi Ideoloji Devlet-Demokrasi ve Kurt Sorunu*", Yurt Kitap Yayin, Ankara, pg.10

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pg. 10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pg. 14

<sup>12</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 6

as the freest country in the world and added, "I believe that the Turk must be the only lord, the only master of this country. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can only have one right in this country, the right to be servants and slaves."<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, a Turkish writer Lale Yalcin emphasized on decisions made by the Turkish courts which 'proved' that such an ethnic group did not exist.<sup>14</sup> Ismail Besikci, a Turkish sociologist imprisoned for long years for his writings on the Kurdish question in Turkey, illustrated attempts of the State's Security Court to eliminate sociological truths through court decisions. In his celebrated book, *Mahkemelerin Actigi Yol* (Paths Opened by Courts), he gives a sample statement made by the attorney general Cemalettin Celik in 1990 during his trial. Celik confidently argued that: "Citizens of the Turkish Republic are called the Turks. In Turkey, there is no other nation other than the Turkish nation, no other language other than the Turkish language. Existence of a nation other than the Turks, a language other than Turkish is unacceptable. All people dependent on the Turkish state are Turks... To say that there is a nation other than Turks and a language other than Turkish and support this language and culture is a crime."<sup>15</sup>

Milton J. Esman links assimilation of language of an ethnic group into the dominant community's language by a state, with the common belief of achieving a medium language for the entire country in order to sustain stability.<sup>16</sup> States which are based on oneness and indivisible integrity, like Turkey, are intended to eliminate dual loyalty and avoid possible internal threats to their integrities. Thereof, prohibition of a language from all public administration, education, media and publications naturally results in annihilation of the ethnic identity, culture and the language of the prohibited language's speakers.<sup>17</sup> Prohibition of the Kurdish language and forced internal displacement were the two main aspects of the assimilation campaign held by the Turkish state against the Kurds. By the end of 1924, one year after the declaration of the new republic, all Kurdish traditional schools (*madrasa*) were closed; and publications with languages other than Turkish were prohibited.<sup>18</sup> *Turkification* of non-Turkish areas inside Turkey started with the prohibition of languages and continued with widespread forced internal displacements. The assimilation process which was based on the official ideology in Turkey, for Esman, resulted in transformation of Kurds into 'mountain Turks.'<sup>19</sup> In 1934, *The Law on Resettlement, no. 2510* legalized the state's intention of turning the Kurds into mountain Turks, and besides, with the Law no. 2510 the Turkish state's assimilation policy reached its apogee. Arguably, this kind of a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pg. 6

<sup>14</sup> Yalcin, L, 1998, "Ismail Besikci: State Ideology and the Kurds", JSTORE, [www.jstor.org/stable/3012136](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012136), pg. 1

<sup>15</sup> Besikci, I. 1993, "Mahkemelerin Actigi Yol", Yurt Kitap Yayin, Ankara, pg. 17

<sup>16</sup> Esman, J M, 1992, "The State and the Language Policy", JSTORE, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601245>, on 18/12/2008, pg. 383

<sup>17</sup> Esman, J M, 1992, "The State and the Language Policy", JSTORE, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601245>, on 18/12/2008, pg. 383

<sup>18</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 6

<sup>19</sup> Esman, J M, 1992, "The State and the Language Policy", JSTORE, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601245>, on 18/12/2008, pg. 383

systematic displacement never repeated until 1984, when the PKK declared war to the Turkish state. With the Law on Resettlement, no. 2510 the Turkish government intended to divide Turkey into three major parts and displace the Kurds from the pure Kurdish areas to pure Turkish areas in order to dissolve the Kurdish ethnic identity.<sup>20</sup> In reality, Turkey has never been able to implement the Law no. 2510, yet such piece of a legislation indicated how the Kurds were subjected to a systematic, well-designed forced assimilation campaign. The law assumed three major parts within Turkey and ordered systematic displacements amongst these three zones. The zones prescribed the zones as:<sup>21</sup>

- *The First Zone:* First zone was the areas where the 'original' Turks lived; mostly in the western parts of the state. Settlers from this part of country were intended to be resettled in Kurdish populated areas as a part of the Turkification process.
- *The Second Zone:* The second zone was named as 'receiver' areas, which were safely Turkish enough in culture and mentality to resettle Kurds from east. The second was where the Kurds would gradually get assimilated and dissolved among the large Turkish populations.
- *The Third Zone:* 'Regions to be completely evacuated'; where the Kurdish tribes mostly lived and the Kurdish language was the mother tongue. The third zone would be the refugee sender part of the country and its inhabitants would have to adopt the Turkish mores gradually in the second zone. Resettled Kurds were banned from forming more than %5 of the population in the localities they were settled and the laws were preventing them from forming civil institutions, villages or groups. Indeed, it was impossible to apply the law no. 2510, since more than a half million Kurds had been displaced from the third zone to the second zone and most of the deported families could not return.

Furthermore, from 1984 to 2004, during the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, domestic and international non-governmental organizations estimated the number of displaced Kurds from Kurdish regions to western parts of Turkey in between 3 and 4 million. In addition, estimated number of destroyed Kurdish villages by the Turkish state is approximately 5000.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence of the long-lasting denial and forced assimilation campaign by the Turkish state, many rebellions took place and numerous Kurdish nationalist movements struggled against the state ideology in Turkey. Sheikh Sait revolt in 1924, Dersim, Mt. Ararat in 1932, Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey (KDP-T) during 60s, Rizgari, Kurdistan Socialists Party (PSK), DDKD and at last the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) claimed for ethnic and national rights. Incongruity between the state and Kurdish organizations resulted in an armed conflict. Naturally, this armed conflict affected the whole country and sometimes even polarized the society. Indeed, the armed conflict between Kurdish rebellious organizations and the Turkish army conditioned the public opinion about the Kurds within the Turkish society. Long funerals of the army for

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<sup>20</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 7

<sup>21</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 7

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 7

death soldiers, who were brought from the Kurdish regions, have strengthened the right-wing and reactivated the Turks against the Kurds in order to save their sons' lives.<sup>23</sup> In the other hand, as it was briefly noted above, the official policy of the state against the Kurdish reality prevented academic institutions and especially universities from conducting scientific research about the issue. Therefore, the Kurdish issue has never been involved in the issues in academic circles.<sup>24</sup>

Writers like Yasar Kemal and Orhan Pamuk could not protect themselves from juridical actions after expressing their oppositions.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the threatening state ideology has created a supporter media which would never let anybody to use their opportunities to criticize the policies of the state, or even talk about the long-lasting issue. The Turkish media is seen as the most open press in the Middle East by many writers and thinkers, whereas the same people are agreed on the fact that when it comes to the Kurdish question the 'free' press is not that open and free.<sup>26</sup> The private sector, students, other ethnic groups, and civil society were also those elements which were aimed by the state ideology on the Kurdish issue when their opinions and expressions contradict the state's policies.

## Conclusion

One should argue that the Kurds' aforementioned belief in impossibility of an independent Kurdistan can be characterized as a reflection of impact of the Turkish state's long-term assimilation policies. That is to say, evidently the state did not succeed in dissolving the Kurdish identity in Turkey, but, arguably could managed to condition the public opinion among the Kurds in terms of reducing national demands for self-determination to a number of cultural and linguistic rights. In my opinion, this is a self-evident consequence of denial policies. Another side-effect of the assimilation and devaluation campaign against the Kurds, indeed, should be the Kurds' wrecked national confidence. As Loizides has also emphasized, Kurds used to discover their identity when they met real Turks. Loizides gives an example from a well-known Kurdish intellectual Mahmut Altunakar. Altunakar states that he was also one of those Kurds who realized that his national identity when he moved to a Turkish city. Before that time, he, too, was subjected to listen to the legends about the Kurds' origins, and tails.<sup>27</sup> Altunakar says: "*Until I arrived in Kutahya I did not know I was Kurdish. We used to throw stones at those calling us Kurds in Diyarbakir. We came to Kutahya and they called us Kurds. They baited us with 'Where is your tail?' Going to school was an ordeal. Then we understood our villagers were right, we were Kurds.*"<sup>28</sup>

In sum, the forced assimilation campaign by the state, for many aspects, did not succeed. Today, the Kurds still struggle for their ethnic and cultural rights and the state's manner towards them

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<sup>23</sup> Barkey, H. , Graham, F, 1998, "*Turkey's Kurdish Question*", Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., New York, pg. 116.

<sup>24</sup> Barkey, H. , Graham, F, 1998, "*Turkey's Kurdish Question*", Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., New York, pg. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pg. 119

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pg. 121

<sup>27</sup> "Tails of Kurds" an expression to insult the Kurds.

<sup>28</sup> McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds, p.404 quoted in Loizides N G, 2010, *State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey*, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 46, No. 4, 513–527, July 2010, pg. 516.

reflects a more moderate behavior. Nonetheless, as it should be apparent from previous chapters of this article, long period of denial and devaluation of the Kurdish identity seems to discourage the Kurds from struggling for their independence. In other words, as I mentioned in the first paragraph of this essay, even intellectual Kurds in Istanbul find the Kurds incapable of establishing a nation-state. Many would locate reasons of such dispositions in the people's realization of the particular political status of the Middle East and Turkey (which for many is not ready for establishing new nation-states). Whereas, in my point of view, reasons for abandoning national sentiments and will for an independent state rest on something deeper. This reminds me of an article published by a modern philosopher, Robert Higgs, on public opinion. For Higgs, public opinion cannot be counted as the bedrock of any state, but represents a deeper feeling: fear.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the reason for the Kurds' strong belief in impossibility of an independent Kurdistan, for me, is the popular fear created by the Turkish state and as well as the policies which discouraged the Kurds to struggle for an independent state. It should be kept in mind that when we talk about the Kurds in Turkey, we talk about a nation long believed that the word 'Kurd' was an insult to them.

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