

# Turkey's "Kurdish Issue": A Surmountable Challenge?

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FOR THREE CONSECUTIVE WINTERS, NIMEP has sent a fact-finding mission to the Middle East. This year, eleven students traveled across Turkey: from Istanbul in the northwest corner, through Ankara and the Anatolian plains, to the southeast cities of Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, and Gaziantep, in the border region with Syria and Iraq. In more than twenty-five interviews with academics, ambassadors, members of think tanks, political parties, and humanitarian organizations, we had the opportunity to contend with diverse local perspectives on four interrelated issues: Turkey's accession to the European Union, Turkish foreign policy, the Kurdish issue, and secularism.

The Kurdish issue is a particularly poignant question, complicated by contradictory historical narratives and its perceived challenge to the essence of Turkish identity. Both of these elements endow it with an emotional significance that makes sober discussion difficult. More than any other topic, the Kurdish issue dominated our group discussion: on our bus, at the dinner table, and at the hotel lobby late into the night.

It was only after spending time in Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurdish-dominated southeastern region, that we began to understand Turkey's ethnic, cultural, and developmental diversity. In many ways, Diyarbakır's landscape physically embodied the vast economic, social, and ideological disparities between Turkey's eastern and western regions, serving to emotionally prepare us for the perspectives we would encounter in our various meetings. The opulence easily found in the Beyoğlu district of İstanbul, wood-paneled cafés overlooking the cobblestones and white lights of İstiklal Street, seemed a world away. In Diyarbakır, multi-colored laundry hung from the balconies of downtown apartment buildings. Our mini-bus drove along a black basalt wall, the pride of the city, that Osman Baydemir, Diyarbakır's mayor, told us was the longest in the world after the

Great Wall of China. He hoped that it would, one day, become a UNESCO World Heritage site.<sup>1</sup> The Byzantine wall, several meters high and broken in places after hundreds of years of wear, stood among green spaces intended to be parks. Litter sullied these patches of grass, which were dotted with thin, bare, trees. Continuing down Diyarbakır's main boulevard, we were surrounded by concrete buildings of varying heights and shades of brown, representative of the city's Soviet-style architecture. It was not until our mid-day trek through Diyarbakır's busy marketplace that we experienced the vibrance of cultural life unique to the region. We observed masses of people crowding the sidewalks and heard the emphatic shouts of haggling customers juxtaposed with the melodic call to prayer. Squeezing through stands selling nuts, tobacco, and various types of clothing, between merchants and buyers, and people on their way home for lunch, we noticed the differences between the people of the Southeast and those we had already met during our trip. Most appeared distinctly Asian, with darker skin and hair, and many people wore a *kefiyyah*. We heard *ein* and *dawdh* and *kha*, syllables formed in the back of the throat, prevalent in spoken Arabic and Kurdish, but nonexistent in Turkish. The Turkish members of our group walked among the people in the market, unable to understand their conversations.

While most Western Turks would not care to visit the Southeast, their love of country inspires a deep-seated sense of attachment to the region. On our first trip down Diyarbakır's main boulevard, a Turkish member of our group from Istanbul told us, "This is my city. This is my street. These people are part of my country." If the prospect of losing Diyarbakır were to face Turkey, the country would fight to maintain it. His statement represents the strong nationalist feeling in Turkey, the manifestations of which appeared throughout our trip. On one occasion, another Turkish member of our group bought a poster of Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, with a flower adorning his lapel. She carried the poster lovingly under her arm whenever a move to another town required us to repack our suitcases. This served to constantly remind us of the personal connection many Turks feel toward Kemalism, its founder, and the stable framework it has provided their country. As non-Turks, and citizens of a multicultural federal country, many of us struggled to come to terms with Turkish nationalism. Our identity is not as strongly tied to the maintenance of political boundaries and the "security" of an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous state. Most Turks we met would be unwilling to even imagine a federal alternative to the unitary state. Dr. Oktay Vural, Vice President of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), told us, "There is no Kurdish minority. A multi-cultural identity [would] divide Turkish culture, national identity, and national unity."<sup>2</sup>

We were forced to contend with discordant perspectives on the “Kurdish problem,” not only among the people we interviewed, but also among members of our group. We also witnessed the impassioned, astounded reaction of one of our Turkish friends when a pro-Kurdish activist stated, during our meeting with him, that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a militant separatist group internationally recognized as terrorist in nature, was not, in fact, a terrorist group, but rather an “armed insurgency.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most intense experiences we had in Diyarbakir was our meeting with the Vice President of HAK-PAR (Pro-Kurdish Party for Rights and Freedom). The party’s headquarters was tucked inside a dark, grey alley. Stepping onto the concrete floor of a large unlit stairwell, we passed through to another dim stairwell. We went up a few flights, where we were met by ten or fifteen officials and members of HAK-PAR, all older men with stern countenances, who seemed to have gathered just to welcome us. We then moved into a large, cold room, where we sat in chairs set up against the walls, and listened to the party’s vice president, Bayram Bozyel, seated behind a large desk at the front of the room. He did not speak English, so a Turkish member of our group sat beside him, acting as translator.

Bozyel began by speaking about the demographics and history of the Kurdish people. He was not angry as he spoke, but frowned with a conviction informed by his personal proximity to the matter. After mentioning rebellions that Turkey had endured in its history, he moved quickly onto topics more sentimental and controversial in nature, both for Kurds and Turks. He told us that Atatürk said the Turkish state should constitute both the Turkish and Kurdish nations, as the Turks and Kurds were brothers. However, Bozyel added that the 1923 constitution broke this promise by stating that everyone within Turkey’s territory was Turkish. He spoke about the official denial of Kurdish ethnicity and the prohibition of the Kurdish language, and then about the strengthening of Kurdish institutions following the 1974 coup.<sup>4</sup>

With increased Kurdish political and social organization, Bozyel told us, Turkey became “an open-air prison,” where hundreds of thousands of Kurds were detained, tortured and killed.<sup>5</sup> In previous meetings and conversations, we had heard numerous accounts, from a variety of sources, of the atrocities committed by both sides in the conflict. Bozyel, however, provided a firsthand perspective of a man whose

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Bar Association**

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membership in a Kurdish organization had earned him seventy days of torture during a prison sentence lasting four and a half years. Our friend, who was translating, repeated the words in English, each breath costing him more and more effort. It was as if, in the act of translation, he was being forced to recognize and validate the occurrence of the events as described by Bozyel.

Bozyel told us that while his party was “against violence,” it was not against the radical PKK, which he considered to be a “party that exists for the honorable existence of Kurds.” He said that HAK-PAR would like to achieve either a federalist system of Turkish and Kurdish states or full self-determination in the Kurdish region. Either option would allow the Kurds the benefit of improved political and social rights.<sup>6</sup> Despite the abuse Bozyel suffered for the expression of his Kurdish identity, and the way in which his experience informed his perspective and recommendations, I could not respect the solutions proposed by his party. The Turkish government, as well as most Turks themselves, would never accept the federalist system that Bozyel was convinced was necessary to answer his people’s craving for equal rights.<sup>7</sup>

Our meeting with the president and vice president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, however, gave hope to moderate solutions. For Tanrıkulu, President of the Association, the Kurdish problem was a result of a conflict between the Kurdish desire to express ethnic identity and the “institutionalized lack of freedom of expression” in Turkey. He said that because most Kurds consider the PKK to be the only dependable advocate for cultural representation, support for the organization has had an emotional and somewhat uninformed basis. He told us that while most supporters of the PKK are unaware of the extent of the organization’s violent activities, intimidation minimizes open opposition to the PKK in the Southeast. Tanrıkulu felt comfortable telling us that he would never associate himself with the PKK. His stance on the issue was widely known, he said, so there was no danger in reiterating it to us. Noting the injustice of his own security, he told us that “freedom of expression shouldn’t be limited to those who are brave.”<sup>8</sup> The statement’s dual-applicability to both the unofficial proscriptions of the Turkish constitution as well as the unwritten intimidation practiced by the PKK imbued it with even greater weight.

Tanrıkulu proposed solutions designed to work within the constructs of the current government and society, which do not involve radical overhauls of standing institutions. He said that most Kurds’ ideal solution is existence within a Turkish state where they actively participate in political life and are able to defend the special social and economic needs of the Southeast and of

the Kurdish people. In such a scenario, the PKK would find itself unable to maintain a monopoly on the Kurdish voice, and its influence would potentially disappear from the Kurdish political scene. Tanrıkulu believed that Turkish acceptance of a Kurdish ethnic sub-identity within the overarching identity of Turkish citizenship would greatly improve the coexistence of ethnic Kurds and Turks. He argued that economic development in the Southeast would further contribute to this end.<sup>9</sup>

Although it was promising to realize that pragmatic methods may provide appropriate answers to a problem based on deep-seated emotion, abstract discussion of these possibilities is infinitely simpler than attaining them. Throughout the trip we tried to balance principles with prudence, normative aspirations with unsavory realities, and universal concepts with local peculiarities. How the Kurdish question is resolved may signal how other states manage the effects of a modernizing world on their complex sense of identity and culture. We should all hope Turkey manages its internal dialogue and that it will serve as an example to its fellow neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Osman Baydemir. January 6, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Oktay Vural. January 4, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Haluk Gerger. January 4, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Bayram Bozyel. January 6, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.