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Through a Glass Darkly: Consequences of a Politicized Past in Contemporary Turkey

By
FATMA MÜGE GÖÇEK

The resolution of the three major political problems faced by the contemporary Turkish nation-state—namely, the massacres of the Armenians in the past, the treatment of the Kurds at present, and the contested partition of the island of Cyprus—has become increasingly urgent as these problems have started to impede Turkey's chances of joining the European Union and also of becoming more democratic. Yet, since the Turkish nation-state commences its own official historical narrative with either the Independence Struggle in 1919 or the subsequent establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, it subsequently approaches these "Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus issues" as totally disparate and mutually independent, and in an ahistorical manner, resulting in increased entrenchment of the conflicts. The article argues that challenging the temporal boundaries of this Turkish official narrative by delving into its "prehistory," namely, the period preceding 1919 or 1923, reveals not only the common origin of all of these issues but also a possible peaceful solution to them all as well as for a more democratic Turkey.

Keywords: contemporary Turkey; Turkish Republic; Armenian issue; Kurdish issue; island of Cyprus; European Union; official narrative

In the contemporary era, when political legitimacy is predicated not on the unreachable sacredness of divine law but rather the precarious profanity of its human-made version, the nation-states' search for both sites of legitimacy and their control has become increasingly significant for their survival. The inherent political potential of alternate narratives of history to

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undermine the current status quo turns the past into such a site. It is therefore no accident that nation-states systematically develop their own official narratives of history in an attempt to sustain their present rule through the control of the past. I argue here that the subsequent political contestation over history makes the verse from the King James Bible (1 *Corinthians* 13:12) alluded to in the title of this article especially fitting in the case of contemporary Turkey. I hope to show in this article that the Turkish nation-state has created an imperfect and faulty perception of historical reality and in so doing has impeded its chances of becoming a truly participatory democracy.

This political contestation of the past is best exemplified by the three major political problems currently faced by the Turkish nation-state, namely, the past massacres of Armenians, the treatment of Kurds at present, and the contested partition of the island of Cyprus. The resolution of these problems has become increasingly urgent as they have started to impede Turkey's chances of joining the European Union (EU) and becoming more democratic. I demonstrate that the Turkish nation-state, acting within the temporal boundaries of its own official historical narrative that commences with either the Independence Struggle in 1919 or the subsequent establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, currently presents and approaches these Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus issues as though they are totally disparate and mutually independent. In so doing, I argue that this tactic fails to make any significant progress in resolving any of them, and instead ends up getting increasingly more entrenched and embroiled in the ensuing conflicts. My contention here is that challenging the temporal boundaries of this Turkish official narrative by delving into what it considers "prehistory," that is, the period preceding 1919 or 1923, reveals not only the common origin of these issues, but also a possible peaceful solution to them that may advance a more democratic Turkey.

I proceed here by first discussing how the Turkish nation-state's official narrative currently presents the three major historical Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus issues as "fragments reflected through a glass darkly," that is, as totally disparate problems. The Turkish nation-state severely curtails the search for possible peaceful solutions to these issues through public discussion by its quick, easy, and successful deployment of the articles in the Turkish Penal Code that rebuke such discussion on the grounds that it may pose possible "insults to Turkishness." As a consequence, the Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus issues become more deeply entrenched, turning their successful resolution into a virtual impossibility. I then challenge the narrative control of the Turkish nation-state over the past by redrawing its temporal boundaries to demonstrate how these three major political issues were intimately connected to one another: all emerged simultaneously during the earlier struggles of the Ottoman Empire with political modernity. Specifically, it was the initial failure of the Ottoman state to provide equal rights to all its imperial subjects that generated both its demise and the subsequent "imperial legacy" of the Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus problems.

As the successor to the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish nation-state has been unwilling to acknowledge this historical precedence; it has treated these problems

ahistorically, as discrete and disparate, and as a consequence, obfuscated and silenced the common factor responsible for producing them all, namely, the state's failure to provide equal political rights to all its constituents. In establishing a homeland for its future citizens, the Turkish nation-state placed its own preservation before all else and legitimated its political rule by predicating it on the dominance of the ethnic Turkish Sunni majority at the expense of the rest. These two measures led to the effective curtailment of the political rights of its citizens, a state of affairs that is empirically best documented through the persistent presence of Turkish penal articles such as the current Article 301 that punishes those who "insult Turkishness." These articles limit the freedom of expression of individual citizens since they are deployed, unlike similar legal articles in Western countries, repeatedly to successful ends (İdiz 2006). Their frequent employment is necessary to help defend and sustain the fragile political boundaries of Turkish nation-state legitimacy predicated on the dominance of the ethnic Turkish Sunni majority.

To reach a peaceful resolution to these three major political problems of "imperial legacy," the Turkish nation-state has to first and foremost officially recognize its historical failure to respect the equal political rights of all its citizens, a failure that I here contend not only lies at the roots of these problems, but the identification of which potentially makes peaceful resolutions possible. Hence, what the Turkish nation-state needs to undertake before all else is a reassessment of its priorities; it needs to respect its citizens' rights to acquire the political capacity to resolve its current domestic and international political problems and, in so doing, become more democratic.

Current Nation-State Narrative on Turkey's Major Political Problems

Even though the Armenian, Kurdish, and Cyprus problems have been present since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the possibility of Turkey's European Union membership has made both their significance as well as their successful resolution more acute. Even though the EU has indeed become more influential in restructuring Turkish politics in line with this possibility, it has recently started to face increasing local resistance on the grounds that its perceived intent is the disintegration of the Turkish nation-state (Williams and Associates 2006).¹ Indeed, the only theme that connects these three problems in the current Turkish official narrative is that they were initially produced by the West to fragment the Turkish nation-state, just as the West had once attempted to break up the Ottoman Empire. This interpretation is referred to in literature (Kirişçi and Çarkoğlu 2003) as the "the Sèvres syndrome," named after the international treaty that provided for the partition of the territories of the Ottoman Empire among the European Powers after the First World War. The fear of loss of territory and the fear of abandonment not only became prominent themes in the

Ottoman Empire but also persisted into the Turkish nation-state and still influence the premise of its official narrative. As the Sèvres syndrome further envelops the three major problems in the paralyzing emotion of fear, it renders their possible resolution even more difficult.

Among the three issues, the Kurdish problem dominates the other two in duration and significance: unlike the Armenians and the Greeks, the Kurds still live in Turkey and comprise a significant portion—approximated at 20 percent—of its population (McDowall 1997, 3).² In addition, the U.S. engagement in Iraq, which has destabilized the region and led to the formulation of a more independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, has made the problem more challenging by generating the possibility of Turkey's incursion into Iraq. So I shall start the discussion with the Kurdish issue.

The Kurdish Problem

Turkey's Kurdish problem is currently defined outside of Turkey as the oppression and denial of rights by a majority group (the Turks) of an ethnic minority (the Kurds), leading to the interpretation of the civil war in southeastern Turkey that raged between 1984 and 1999 as a national liberation movement (Cornell 2001). In official Turkish discourse, however, there is no mention of the Kurdish problem or the civil war, but rather a socioeconomic issue in the southeastern region of the country and a problem of induced terrorism and violence dependent on external support from foreign states that aim to weaken Turkey. Hence, the Turkish nation-state insists on identifying the region through its geographical parameters as it interprets the employment of the term "Kurdistan" as an endorsement of secession. The Kurdish organization that spearheads the movement, namely, the Kurdish Workers' Party, better known as PKK (Parti Karkaren Kurdistan), is referred to by the Turkish nation-state as a "terrorist organization" and its members as "terrorists," terminology that acts as a litmus test to identify those who are Turkish patriots and their supporters. Turkey has also successfully campaigned for decades to have the PKK internationally declared a terrorist organization. Still, the international media are careful to refer to them as "Kurdish rebels." These alternate attributions do not change the fact that what erupted during 1984 and 1999 in southeastern Turkey between the Kurds and the Turkish state left at its wake at least seventy thousand casualties, with Turkey officially declaring thirty-seven thousand people killed and the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan attesting that at least twenty-five thousand Kurds were killed (Daloğlu 2007).

The term "Kurdish" applies to speakers of one of four closely related Indo-Iranian languages (Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza, and Gurani) or descendants of people so identified who speak other languages (McDowall 2000, 9-10). Even though the exact number of people within Turkey who satisfy this criterion is unknown, scholars have argued (Kirişçi and Winrow 1997) that in the early 1990s roughly

13 percent of the total population in Turkey was Kurdish (van Bruinessen 1992, 15). If the Turkish-speaking descendants of Kurds are also included, however, the total number of Kurds in Turkey would certainly be much higher, probably reaching a quarter of Turkey's present population. The Kurds are located mainly in contiguous territory within the borders of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran with smaller indigenous populations in Syria and Armenia; the Kurds' stateless existence across many nation-states further complicates their condition. Data from the 1993 Turkish Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) demonstrate that the Kurdish population in Turkey is relatively much worse off in terms of economic and political capital invested by the state than the Turkish population as a whole (İçduygu and Sirkeci 1999). Within Turkey, over the past two decades, millions of Kurds who were forced by the state to evacuate their villages for posing a security threat have settled as migrants in the cities of western Turkey; large numbers have also left for Western Europe, primarily Germany.

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This forced internal Kurdish migration of the past two decades has affected the nature of the political engagement between the Kurds and the Turkish state (Kocher 2002). The PKK, a militant organization established in 1978 with the aim of creating an independent, Marxist-Leninist, Kurdish state in the region, was initially successful because of the suitability of the southeast to guerrilla warfare. However, the organization lost its efficacy as the vast internal migration induced by the Turkish state fundamentally altered the Kurdish demography, making it impossible for the PKK to rekindle the insurgency warfare, which was a rural phenomenon, in the new urban spaces. The PKK splintered from urban Turkish Marxist-Leninist youth groups that engaged in political violence in the mid-1970s and as such initially largely crosscut the Turkish-Kurdish divide. Yet, it also incurred criticism from the Kurds by attacking landlords and rightists in the Siverek region in the late 1970s (Kocher 2002).

Political unrest in Turkey's Kurdish-dominated areas in the southeast was almost simultaneous with the establishment of the Turkish Republic; the Sheikh

Said Rebellion in 1925 was a reaction to the increasingly secular and Turkish character of the emerging Turkish state and attempted to bring back the Caliphate. This rebellion combining nationalist and religious elements was followed by others in Ağrı in 1930 and Dersim (Tunceli) in 1937. Yet, the harsh reaction of the Turkish state demonstrated its turn toward authoritarianism, especially in defining the nation as homogeneous predicated on ethnic unity. This violent suppression was accompanied by the disappearance of the word “Kurd” from the lexicon, the ban of the Kurdish language, the replacement of the names of Kurdish villages and towns with Turkish ones, and the denial of the right of parents to give Kurdish names to their children (Barkey 2000). While some Kurds did assimilate and became Turkish, many others refused or became silent. Following Atatürk’s death in 1938, the regime further deteriorated during single-party rule in terms of sustaining democratic elements.

Even though the Kurdish rebellions before World War II had a strong tribal and religious character rather than a national one, this pattern underwent significant change after Turkey held its first multiparty election in 1946. Later, during the 1970s, the continuing migration to the urban areas in western Turkey as well as the increased enrollment in higher education had escalated public awareness of the economic and political disparities between the southeast and the rest of Turkey, subsequently radicalizing state-society relations. Even though the Kurds were initially absorbed into the leftist movements predominant among the students in Turkish universities, they gradually formed separate political movements. Ultimately the PKK emerged on one side and a more traditionally nationalistic wing identified closely with Mustafa Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party on the other. The right-wing Kurdish nationalists nevertheless failed to prevail as internal tribal divisions among them weakened their strength and appeal, and their leaders, who were forced into exile after the 1971 military intervention, were eventually assassinated in northern Iraq (Cornell 2001, 38).

The PKK had initially described traditional Kurdistan as being under colonial rule where tribal leaders and the local bourgeoisie colluded to help the Turkish state exploit the lower classes and, therefore, identified Kurdish tribal society as a main target of its revolutionary struggle. Yet, the PKK also could not stay out of tribal politics as it had to negotiate with tribal leaders. This inconsistency and the subsequent violence the PKK employed against those it aimed to liberate disillusioned many Kurds and sapped its support. For instance, in the PKK’s heyday in 1992, a poll reported by the Turkish *Milliyet* newspaper on September 6, 1992, conducted in the southeast showed that only 29 percent of the population viewed the PKK as the best representative of the Kurdish people. The PKK subsequently attempted to bolster its support and the ranks of its members by toning down its Marxist rhetoric and instead emphasizing Kurdish nationalism (Cornell 2001, 39).

The 1980 military coup inflicted heavy damage on the PKK by causing a small number of activists, including the leader Abdullah Öcalan and others, to flee Turkey for Syria and the Bekaa Valley of northern Lebanon. Still, as the Turkish army violently repressed all other leftist and Kurdish movements within the

country, the PKK, which managed to survive by leaving Turkey, ended up emerging as the only credible Kurdish challenger to the state. The impact of the 1980 coup on Turkey has been so strong that some scholars (Jacoby 2005) argue that two separate regimes came into being: autocratic militarism in the eastern provinces and semiauthoritarian incorporation in the west of the country. Some scholars have argued (Ataman 2002) that the 1980s also witnessed the transformation in the ethnic policy of the state from the early Republican policy, which accepted every citizen of Turkey as "Turks" while denying the existence of all Muslim ethnic groups, to one that accepted the existence of Muslim ethnic groups such as Kurds as well as that of non-Muslims. However, this transformation was not enduring.

The origins of the 1984 to 1999 civil war can also be traced to the subsequent expulsion of the PKK leadership from Turkey in the aftermath of this 1980 military coup. The civil war began as a series of cross-border raids staged from northern Iraq (İmset 1992, 38-41). After a few tactically disastrous attacks against the Turkish army, the PKK adopted a strategy of targeting civilians perceived as an actual or potential collaborator with the state (including mayors, schoolteachers, and tribal chiefs), eventually managing to sustain its hold over rural areas, although not towns or urban centers (Barkey and Fuller 1998, 28-29; İmset 1992, 34-35, 44, 100). The strategy the PKK employed seemed to conform closely to the classic Maoist principles of an "insurgency" that does not target the state's military forces, but rather focuses on creating a general climate of insecurity and lack of public confidence by reducing contact between the population and its government. Also, the PKK is known to have engaged in kidnapping as a tool of recruitment, and Kurdish families have had to pay revolutionary surcharges to the PKK of approximately \$2,500 if they permitted their sons to be drafted to the Turkish military for their mandatory service (İmset 1992, 84-86; Rosenberg 1994).

The Turkish state countered by adopting counterinsurgency tactics (İmset 1992, 100). One rural defense tactic entailed recruiting tribesmen into a local militia known as "village guards" (*korucu*). The other tactic involved forcing civilians to "evacuate" their villages, thereby aiming to disrupt guerrilla logistics by physically removing the population. As of 1999 when the civil war finally ended, according to Turkish government estimates, 3,236 settlements had been cleared in southeastern Turkey, forcibly displacing 362,915 persons (U.S. Department of State 2000, 18). In the process, not only were the Kurdish villages often destroyed by fire to deny their use as bases by guerrillas and to prevent the return of residents, but the evacuations were also brutally executed with beatings, rapes, and selective instances of extrajudicial killing (Ron 1995). In addition, in the early to mid-1990s, several members of Kurdish parties were gunned down in "mystery killings," presumably committed by government-supported contra-guerrillas (Kocher 2002, 6).

With the commencement of the military operations in 1984, the Turkish state and the PKK became identified as the two sides between which one had to choose (Cornell 2001, 39). From then on, the Turkish nation-state insisted on equating virtually all expressions of Kurdish identity with PKK terrorism, and the

Turkish military in particular was adamant about pursuing solely an armed solution to the Kurdish problem. Within this polarized environment, the PKK generated resources with the support of Kurds in exile, primarily in Western Europe, the narcotics trade in the region, and the indirect and direct support from states like Syria that had an interest in weakening Turkey. Even though Turkey's economic development program for southeastern Anatolia inaugurated in the 1980s planned to use water from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers to irrigate large tracts of the arid region, the Turkish nation-state faltered as it failed to acknowledge and respect Kurdish identity; did not consider unarmed solutions, engaging instead in extralegal activities such as drug trafficking and terrorism to curb the reach of the PKK; and, in the process, became further alienated from the local populace through its indiscriminate repression and violence (Radu 2001).

The Gulf War initially proved beneficial to the Kurds of Turkey as the coalition against Iraq and Operation Provide Comfort removed northern Iraq from the control of the Iraqi state and also created a U.S.-backed Kurdish Federated State. In an attempt to keep the PKK out of the area, the Turkish state undertook an active role in working out the power-sharing agreement in this federated state between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Celal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Yet, the conflicts between the KDP and PUK instead fostered the growth of the PKK, which based its operations there, wresting by 1994 large chunks of territory away from the control of the Turkish military. The subsequent change in the tactics of the Turkish state by the middle of the 1990s, with the introduction of better health care and education for the local population, adaptation to guerrilla warfare, and the large population deportation of the Kurds from the region to urban centers elsewhere in the country, sapped the PKK's control, with the result that by 1998 Syria remained the PKK's only remaining supporter. The Turkish state then exploited its alliance with Israel to threaten Syria with war unless it expelled Öcalan and the PKK bases in the Beka'a Valley. Damascus complied by expelling Öcalan in October 1998, and he was later captured and delivered to the Turks; the PKK forces that were relocated from Syria to northern Iraq were likewise delivered a severe blow by the Turkish military in 1999, effectively ending the civil war (Radu 2001; Cornell 2001).

Even though many scholars conjecture that the joint activities of the Turkish state and the PKK radicalized and polarized the local population (McDowall 2000), ethnic mobilization and assimilation often occurred simultaneously. The institutions of nation building, principally conscription and universal education, are still in place; most Kurds state that if teaching Kurdish culture became a realistic option, they would teach their children Turkish culture for opportunity and Kurdish culture for identity (Kocher 2002, 11). Since the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999, a new political movement has begun to emerge in Turkey, favoring electoral competition and noninstitutional pressure tactics over violence. The recent July 2007 election to the Turkish parliament of Kurdish deputies as independents as well as the presence among the ranks of the reigning Justice and Development Party of other deputies of Kurdish origin have further

bolstered this movement. That most Kurds never favored secession and most still do not favor it, opting instead for a stable multiethnic solution, renders any political solution based on autonomy or federalism obsolete and impractical (Göktaş 2007).

That most Kurds never favored secession and most still do not favor it, opting instead for a stable multiethnic solution, renders any political solution based on autonomy or federalism obsolete and impractical.

Two observed patterns therefore become significant in determining the future course of Kurdish-Turkish relations, one entailing the divergence in perception between the Turkish state and society and the other the altered political contours of the region. First, interestingly enough, despite almost two decades of armed conflict instigated by the Turkish nation-state and the subsequent casualties, the boundaries between the Kurds and the Turks within society have historically been porous and crosscut by key religious cleavages, with about 30 percent of the Anatolian Muslims being historically and doctrinally related to Shi'ism, with Alevi as the largest group. A significant portion of Turkey's current political and business elite is also of Kurdish origin (Cornell 2001). In addition, not only has the strong tendency to marry within one's own ethnic group decreased significantly between the early 1960s and the late 1990s, but the intermarriage rate between Kurds and Turks has also increased significantly (Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits 2002). As the two communities remain accommodating to each other and societal-level tensions remain manageable, the Kurds in Turkey would in the future probably remain bilingual and integrate into mainstream political life where the majority of the Kurds would vote for rightist and Islamist parties (Kocher 2002). The participation in national and local politics has also provided the movement with a new institutional basis for public gathering, legal protection from prosecution, new access to domestic and international audiences, and new symbolic resources (Watts 2006).

There are also no political grounds for a return in the future to generalized violence between the Turks and the Kurds unless it was purposefully instigated by the Turkish military to maintain the status quo. In addition, Kurds in Turkey

still face discrimination, as there is no overt public acknowledgement, recognition, or respect of their ethnicity. Even though compulsory education, mandatory military service, and state-controlled radio and press have enabled the Turkish Republic to create a unified monolithic national culture as well as economic opportunity structures that in general increased the participation of all social groups in and commitment to the system, the participants would only have access to the resources generated by the state by foregoing their ethnic non-Turkish identity (Cornell 2001). The institution that is most significant in maintaining and reproducing this public discrimination is the Turkish military, which very fastidiously upholds the official stand of ethnic homogeneity to ensure there is not a single high-ranking Kurdish—or Armenian or any member of a minority group—officer who is officially recognized as such. On the contrary, it is rumored that the military strictly investigates the files of all future officers with the intent to weed out such “impure” individuals. The same uncompromising stand also translates into practice as the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Turkish military, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, declares that there is no difference between the “Kurdish terrorists” and those who provide them with shelter. The Turkish army has also long opposed any easing of its strict legislation governing terrorism, freedom of expression, and cultural rights, and has done so by justifying its position with the argument that reform would imply concessions to terrorists (Zengin 2007). The Turkish state thus still refuses to recognize the cultural identity of its Kurdish citizens by prohibiting the teaching of Kurdish in schools and the full unlimited broadcasting of Kurdish radio and television programs, especially in their ancestral region in the southeast where they predominate (Ergil 2000). The Turkish nation-state’s ensuing single-minded focus on a military response to the PKK continually polarizes identity and opinion, turning peaceful civilians into militants (Kocher 2002).

The impact of the Iraq war on Turkey points to the struggle between the EU pressures to improve the rights of Kurds and the state’s reluctance to implement such democratic reforms because of increased insecurity as well as the imagined threat of greater Kurdish autonomy. Still, the recent attitude of the ruling Justice and Development Party toward Iraq signals the future possibility of a more pragmatic approach leading to either the de-securitization of the Kurdish issue by the civil authorities or its resecuritization by the military (Tarık 2005). The crucial underlying issue is nevertheless putting into practice the existing legislation. Previously, Turkey’s main problem stemmed not from the legislation itself, but from a state bureaucracy that was either unable or unwilling to implement reforms. Even though the growth of the public sphere and civil associations in Turkey are positive indicators of democratization and economic development, the current engagement of the Turkish state and especially the military in northern Iraq very conveniently curbs these positive transformations. It is particularly the “national security” or “Sèvres” syndrome in Turkey that modulates the pendulum swing between security and liberalization to reveal that in relation to the PKK, the Turkish nation-state has difficulties designing postterror policies, while

the PKK appears unprepared to fully disarm and give up, which leaves political struggle as the only option (Aydınlı 2002).

The Cyprus Problem

The most significant historical event in creating the Cyprus problem in Republican history was the 1974 invasion of the northern tip of the island of Cyprus by the Turkish military. Cyprus had initially become politically independent in 1960 when the negotiations among the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities with Great Britain, Greece, and Turkey as “guarantor powers” led to the formulation of a constitution. The ensuing single, ethnically mixed, bicomunal Republic of Cyprus had equal representation between the minority Turkish-speaking Muslim community (20 percent) and the Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian one (80 percent) (Bahçeli 2000, 205). Yet by the end of 1963, interethnic violence led to the collapse of this bicomunal political construct; the Turkish-Cypriot community subsequently withdrew from the government to set up its own political structure. Even though the United Nations Security Council intervened the following year to stop the continuing violence, the coup by the Greek government a decade later in 1974, which effectively removed the president of the Republic of Cyprus, led to the Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island. The Turkish nation-state justified the invasion by stating that it was acting in its capacity as one of the guarantor powers of the 1960 arrangement (Moulakis 2007, 538). From then, relations with Greece remained tense as the 1976 and 1987 crises over the Aegean continental shelf and the 1996 crisis over the İmía islets in the Aegean Sea occurred, highlighting the contested boundaries of the two nation-states.

Meanwhile, while Greece signed the EU Association Agreement in 1961 and Turkey in 1963, Greece became an EU member in 1981 while Turkey could only become a candidate in 1999. The lack of further progress after 1970 for Turkey’s accession into the EU was partly a result of the economic and political crises that led to disruptions in the democratic system by the military in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The import-substitution strategy of the 1960s and the 1970s caused overdependence on imports and foreign borrowing. After the oil crises of 1974 and 1979, Turkish governments also faced severe foreign exchange shortages, leading to precautionary rationing of some essentials (Öniş and Webb 1992). Such economic pressure had transformed ideological radicalism into day-to-day violence. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, the EU once again put possible negotiations with Turkey on the back burner. The prospects for Turkish membership were so weak that the 2000 summit held in Nice did not even hypothetically provide for the number of future Turkish votes or members of the European Parliament (Pahre and Uçaray 2005).

The Greek-Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus applied for EU membership in 1990, and even though Cyprus was located on divided territory, the European

Council did not treat Cyprus any differently from the other candidates such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, or Slovenia. The EU instead adopted in 1994 a “first solution then membership” approach by announcing that the subsequent phase of enlargement would include Cyprus and Malta, without specifying what would happen if the Cypriot problem had not been resolved by the time negotiations had concluded. In retaliation to this stand of the EU, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) started instead the process of partial integration with Turkey. Clashes occurred between Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots throughout the summer of 1996. When full accession negotiations with Cyprus and the other candidates of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia commenced in 1998, the EU’s inability to deal with the bifurcated political structure of the island of Cyprus led to its total avoidance of a discussion of the future participation of the Turkish-Cypriot community. Right after the ensuing accession of the Greek-Cypriot-led Cyprus in 2003, the United Nations peace plan referred to as the “Annan plan” failed and was voted down by the Greek side in a referendum. Currently, with the intent to end the isolation of the Turkish-Cypriot community, the EU has recently proposed a comprehensive package of aid and trade to the TRNC, which it has also included in its new Neighborhood Policy (Moulakis 2007).

In explaining the causes of conflict in Greek-Turkish relations in general and the Cyprus problem in particular, all studies emphasize the role of negative perceptions and representations of the other that are reproduced and maintained through education, media, and literature and thereby naturalized as fact. For instance, the perception of threat from Greece in Turkey is sustained by the association of Greeks with Byzantine intrigue and diplomatic tricks as well as by memories of the Greek invasion of Turkish territories after the First World War, even though since the mid-1990s historians in Greece and in Turkey have made collaborative efforts to purge the schoolbooks of chauvinistic content and demonizing references (Milas 2000).

Still, the prevailing Turkish foreign policy of deterrence toward Greece is based on a suspicion that since its inception, Greece, inspired by the “Megali Idea” of a Greater Greece including the former lands of the Byzantine Empire, has been pursuing a policy of constant territorial expansion against Turkey. Greece’s gaining EU membership ahead of Turkey has led Turkey to also perceive the European Union as yet another venue for the revisionist agenda of Greece against Turkey. Within this policy framework of the Turkish nation-state, any international attempt to legitimate policies by alluding to the EU is immediately interpreted by the Turks as concessions made to Greece. The attitude of the Turkish nation-state toward the Cyprus problem mimics its stand toward Greece. Turkish public opinion, shaped by the military bureaucratic authority to “not abandon national causes,” has severely hindered the possibility of conflict resolution (Adamson 2001; Kirişçi and Çarkoğlu 2003). Yet, the course of Greek-Turkish relations started to shift with the devastating earthquakes suffered by Turkey and Greece in August and September 1999 as the positive influence of civil society started to prevail in both contexts over that of the state.

The Armenian Problem

Among the three current problems faced by Turkish state and society, only the Armenian problem was jump-started in the Republican period by forces outside of the control of the Turkish nation-state. Commencing in 1975—and lasting until 1986—two secret Armenian organizations named the Justice Commandos against the Armenian Genocide (JCOAG) and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) decided to draw attention to the 1915 ethnic cleansing of the Armenians the Ottoman state had committed without subsequent accountability through a series of assassinations of Turkish diplomats and the bombings of Turkish sites (Şimşir 2000).

When these attacks first started, the Turkish state and society for a long time searched for world powers that might have instigated them, as they could not comprehend that it was actually Armenians executing these actions on their own. The mythified version of the Turkish past, devoid of any account of state violence, had been widely ingrained through mass education for a couple of generations; the Turkish nation-state had also considered the Armenian issue “closed” at the Lausanne Peace negotiations in 1922 and 1923. There did not exist at the Turkish Foreign Ministry a single English-language text depicting the Turkish state’s version of 1915 to be sent to Western courts to inform public prosecutors of the perpetrators of the attacks and assassinations who were being tried (Şimşir 2000, vol. I, 108).

The attacks caused both the state and military to intervene by fostering, organizing, and institutionalizing the propensity to symbolic violence against the Armenians, particularly in two ways. First, through the 1980s a nationalized historiography of the Armenian issue was developed, penned mostly by retired diplomats, along the lines of the mythified history taught in schools since the inception of the republic. Second, the state established a series of organizations with the overt purpose of studying and researching the Armenian issue. Then in 1980 the military launched a covert paramilitary organization to go after and murder the assassins of the Turkish diplomats that the Western powers either could not arrest or released after short prison sentences (Özdemir 1997). The speeches of state officials and military officers at the diplomats’ funerals gradually transformed from mourning to seeking vengeance, to promising the Turkish populace that “their blood would not remain on the ground” (Şimşir 2000, vol. I, 449). Indeed, it was after the 1980 military coup, during the former general Kenan Evren’s presidency, that a clandestine paramilitary organization was established to pursue the assassins (Özdemir 1997). These attempts alongside the nationalized mythified historiography indicated that the Turkish state and military were intent on institutionalizing the propensity for symbolic violence rather than alleviating it. And this propensity went hand in hand with the reaction of the populace.

The emotional upsurge in the newspapers (Şimşir 2000, vol. I, 358-59) immediately singled out the Armenians in Turkey, stating “our Armenian citizens” were living in peace, that is, without being murdered, and that they were also wealthy to boot. Of course, this depiction revealed in and of itself the prejudice inherent in Turkish society by singling them out as “Armenians”; by patronizing them as

“our”; and, once again, by drawing attention to their wealth, which had not only previously incurred the wrath of the Muslims multiple times, but which had by this point become insignificant in relation to the immense wealth of the new “Turkish” bourgeoisie. Then, as the assassinations and attacks continued, the Armenian community was asked by various newspaper editors to write to their brethren in Western countries “to tell them to stop the attacks,” and the Armenian patriarch in Turkey had to issue press releases condemning the attacks and to hold mass in honor of the assassinated Turks (Şimşir 2000, vol. I). The implied connection the Turkish newspapers took for granted as existing between the Armenians in Turkey and the radical Armenian organizations revealed yet another source of prejudice. That the Armenian community was brought under pressure by the state to constantly issue statements that they lived in peace in Turkey, that they condemned the attacks, and that they professed their undying allegiance to the Turkish Republic is only recently being publicly acknowledged by the community (Şimşir 2000, vol. I).

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Likewise during this period, the Turkish state mobilized the Jewish community, especially in relation to their connection to the Jewish lobby in the United States, to counter and oppose the weight of the Armenian Diaspora, which actively began the attempt to get the Armenian ethnic cleansing in 1915 politically recognized as genocide in the United States and elsewhere. This was especially difficult for the Jewish community that had, after all, suffered the Holocaust; indeed, the developments in social sciences and ethics to cope with the occurrence and impact of the Holocaust had produced the entirely new critical historical scholarship that had enabled philosophers, social scientists, and humanists to study so well the social acts of racism, violence, and discrimination.

The Jewish community at large might have been expected to be the primary supporters of Armenian genocide recognition, yet two factors initially inhibited them; one was the argument of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and the other the support the Turkish state promised and gave Israel in the Middle East as well as the Jewish community in Turkey. Only very recently has the Jewish lobby in the United States decided to reverse its policy based on the argument that ethical principles ought to precede political concerns (Banerjee 2007).

Toward the end of the 1980s, however, Turkey started to undergo a series of transformations that began to diminish the hold of the state and the military over society. The emerging Anatolian bourgeoisie in the provinces brought to power the Justice and Development Party in spite of the opposition of the state establishment and the military. Because the Justice and Development Party was rooted in Anatolia, it had access to and awareness of the local histories that were cognizant of what had actually happened to the Armenians in 1915; in addition, many of the members were devout Muslims whose ancestors had once presumably opposed the Armenian deportations on religious principles alone. As a consequence, the possibility emerged of their considering an alternate discourse on the Armenian issue to that of the Turkish state, one that could be especially formulated in cooperation with the liberal public intellectuals who, equipped with the forces of civil society and the tools of new critical scholarship, had also started to take a critical look at their own past and produce research along these lines.

The location of the minorities within the social structure initially continued unchanged as the rhetoric sustained that they were citizens with equal rights, while in practice they continued to face legal, social, and political discrimination. Yet, the increased significance of identity politics and the possibility of European Union membership resulted in liberalization in Turkey, which enabled many minorities, including (in addition to Greeks, Armenians, and Jews) Kurds, Alevi, Assyrians, and Lazis to assert their rights. The more liberalized environment enabled all these groups as well as the public intellectuals and the flourishing civil society and nonprofit organizations to voice their concerns. Even though the location of such minority groups within the Turkish social structure and the prejudice and discrimination they faced could be more publicly articulated, however, it still could not prevent lawsuits from being brought against books and articles on these issues for “insulting Turkishness,” and for a journalist like Hrant Dink from being assassinated on January 19, 2007, by an ultra-nationalist Turk (Arsu 2007).

In summary, then, the Turkish nation-state, rather than confronting its past and the violence contained therein against minorities in general and the Armenians in particular, chose to deny it by constructing an official counternarrative. It also took issue with the international employment of the term “genocide” to refer to what had occurred in 1915—even though what occurred certainly fit the 1948 United Nations definition—and instead spent and continues to spend millions of dollars to prevent all the countries of the world from recognizing what happened to the Armenians in 1915 as genocide.

An Alternate Conceptualization

The official narratives of the Kurdish, Cyprus, and Armenian problems discussed above all reveal the staunch, defensive stand of the Turkish nation-state in constantly seeking behind every action ploys that might be inspired by the West to decimate and destroy its existence. Given this initial stand of distrust, it is no accident that the Turkish nation-state is incapable of reaching peaceful resolutions in any one, let alone all three, of these problems. Yet, I would argue here that such peaceful solutions to these problems could become possible only and primarily upon challenging the temporal boundaries of the official Turkish narrative. Such a challenge would reveal the common origins and cause of these problems and, in so doing, render possible peaceful solutions to all three.

I argue specifically that the origins of the Kurdish, Cyprus, and Armenian problems can all be traced to one particular historical event: a treaty in 1878. During March 1878, at the end of the 1876 to 1878 Russo-Turkish war that proceeded disastrously for the latter, the Russian army swept through the Ottoman defenses in the Balkans to literally end up on the outskirts of Constantinople. The Ottoman state had to sign a treaty on very unfavorable terms at San Stefano, very close to the imperial capital. This treaty was regarded by the Ottoman state as the historical juncture when the “Armenian issue” became internationalized, for the Ottoman Armenian subjects of the empire had sent a delegation to the Russian tsar, asking him to include among the peace articles a guarantee for the protection of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This move by the Ottoman Armenian community actually represented the end of their frustrated long wait since the beginning of the nineteenth century for the actualization of the promised—but never delivered—reforms of equality and protection for all Ottoman minorities (Göçek 2008).

As the Ottoman land tenure system was transformed due to the increased need of the Ottoman treasury for cash, landholding patterns were also altered. Both the exploitation of the lands and the peasants on them to attain better yields, as well as the 1858 declaration of private property in the empire, had benefited the dominant Muslim majority at the expense of the minorities. The non-Muslim minorities lived in self-contained communities within a social structure based on the Islamic legal system of the *sharia*; they were obliged to pay a special tax in return for the protection offered to them by the Ottoman state, and they were prevented by law from bearing arms themselves. This limitation was especially problematic in the eastern and southeastern provinces of the empire, where the Kurds often aggressed upon, plundered, and even seized the lands of the Armenian Greek and Assyrian peasants who could not protect themselves (Klein 2007). The Kurds would then flee into the Russian Empire to escape punishment and seek the tsar’s protection, and the Ottoman state often restrained from punishing such Kurds lest they switch their loyalties to the Russian state. Therefore, the complaints of the Armenians and others would often go unaddressed. The long-awaited reforms became destined for failure. Hence, it was in

this context that the Armenians and the Kurds first became social actors in Ottoman and later Turkish history.

Concerned with these events occurring in the eastern provinces of the empire and wary of the hold the Russian Empire was about to acquire over the Ottoman state at their expense, the French and the British insisted upon convening in Berlin and signing another treaty, one whose paragraph 61 guaranteed the life and property of the Armenians in the Anatolian provinces and promised reforms (Göçek forthcoming). In addition, faced with the loss of vast territories in the Balkans, the Ottoman state requested the intervention of the British. Yet, the British refused to intervene unless they were given the island of Cyprus by the Ottoman sultan. Hence, after the occasion of the Berlin Congress, the island of Cyprus, which had been under Ottoman rule since its conquest in the late sixteenth century, passed onto the hands of the British and subsequently became a much contested territory. Therefore, the three subsequent problems of contemporary Turkey were all located in this particular historical juncture of 1878 within the larger framework of the Ottoman negotiation with political modernity.

More significant, however, was the main cause that bestowed all three problems with social agency, namely, the inability of the Ottoman state to carry out the reforms that would guarantee the equality of the rights of all its subjects regardless of ethnicity. The Ottoman state was unable to deliver this equality before the demise of its empire, and it left this problem as a legacy to the emerging Turkish nation-state. Just as the Ottoman Empire had always put the preservation of the state and the dynasty before all else, including the well-being of its subjects, the burgeoning Turkish nation-state, too, made this primacy of the state its founding principle. Consequently, it frequently infringed upon the rights of its citizens. As the Turkish state was unable and unwilling to confront, acknowledge, and transform this priority and the powerful relations it entailed, it positioned instead this internal failure of the sharing of power with its citizens on the imagined designs the West had made toward its destruction (Göçek forthcoming).

Turkey's desire to become a part of Europe had its roots in the nineteenth century and in the negotiation of the Ottoman Empire with Western political modernity, starting with a series of reforms endorsed by many legal declarations such as the 1839 Declaration to "Reorder" the empire, also known as the *Tanzimat*. Turkey has thus been self-consciously converging with European practices and preferences for a long time. Still, its inability to face the challenges brought upon by this transformation to a Western democratic system leads the Turkish state to instead promulgate, carefully maintain, and practice a legal system that contains articles making the freedom of thought in the country a crime.

Even though the Turkish state, including the military, constantly blames the expansionist tendencies of European powers, the West does nevertheless continue to occupy a privileged place in the mind's eye of Turkish state and society, thereby contributing to the democratization process. Significant developments in this regard have been Turkey's transition to a multiparty regime in 1946; its alignment with NATO in 1952; and its opening up in the 1980s to the world economy

and undertaking significant efforts to alter its state-controlled, protectionist economic and political structure. Still, the military continues to consider itself the guardian of the state, established and maintained according to Republican and secularist principles to be protected not only against external threats but also against its internal enemies.

In summary, then, what enables the discovery of the common roots of these three issues is the ability to confront, analyze, and challenge them within their own historical context. Hence, the first step the Turkish nation-state ought to take toward the resolution of its Kurdish, Cyprus, and Armenian issues is to confront its history in its entirety rather than through fragments. Once this is done, the observation emerges that all three cases contain the consequences—often unintended—of the dissolution of an empire, the violence of which was directed against the minorities who were too weak to defend themselves. The manner with which all three cases were dealt points out the fundamental priority of the Turkish state, namely, state preservation at all costs, including, especially, the lives of its citizens. I would argue that this prioritization needs to change for the Turkish nation-state to stop seeing the past “through a glass darkly,” and to become one with its society and citizens, instead of surviving and sustaining itself at their expense.

Notes

1. The two questions asked to capture the Turkish attitude toward the European Union were as follows: (1) “The current EU requirements are similar to those required by the Treaty of Sèvres (with which the Ottoman Empire was dismembered after World War I and the National Independence Struggle fought).” The responses were *totally disagree*, 10 percent; *disagree*, 8 percent; *agree*, 40 percent; *totally agree*, 17 percent; and *don’t know/no answer*, 25 percent. (2) “The West wants to divide and break Turkey like they broke the Ottoman Empire.” The responses were even stronger at 13 percent, 10 percent, 16 percent, 52 percent, and 10 percent, respectively. The nationally representative sample was composed of 1,215 plus an additional 300 youth.

2. It is extremely difficult to estimate the size of the Kurdish population in Turkey because official population surveys do not collect—or at least do not officially dispense—such information; “Turkish” citizenship is regarded by the state as an all-inclusive category. As the earliest Republican population survey had included a question on the main language spoken in the household, this question has often been employed to estimate the size of the Kurdish population. Yet, this question was then omitted in the more recent surveys, leading different scholars to employ diverse multipliers in estimating the current Kurdish population. This explains the many disparate figures on the Kurdish population proportion.

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