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The Kurdish Question in Turkey

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The Kurdish Question in Turkey

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One of the greatest obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Turkey has been the country's treatment of its Kurdish citizens. Although Kurdish is the mother tongue of as many as one in five inhabitants of Turkey, the government prohibits the teaching of Kurdish in schools and the broadcasting of Kurdish radio and television programs. These restrictions attest to a continuing refusal on the part of the Turkish state to recognize the cultural identity of its Kurdish citizens, a policy that has generated widespread discontent among the country's Kurds. Although about half the Kurdish population of Turkey now lives in other parts of the country, the rest are still concentrated in their ancestral region in the southeast, where they predominate. This region has had a long history of Kurdish insurrections, but none so deadly as the struggle waged during the past two decades by the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), led by Abdullah Öçalan. Though precise figures are difficult to come by, there is little doubt that more than 30,000 people have lost their lives in clashes between government security forces and PKK militants.

Turkey's inability to come to grips with its Kurdish citizens' demand for cultural recognition not only prevents a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish problem but also impedes the country's acceptance by, integration into, and identification with Europe and the West. The European Union (EU), which Turkey would like very much to join, has consistently maintained that improvements in Turkey's human rights **[End Page 122]** record are required if its candidacy for EU membership is to be successful. Following Öçalan's arrest and conviction in 1999, the European Court of Human Rights called for a suspension of his death sentence until it had reviewed the verdict, and Turkey has, thus far at least, conditionally complied. How Turkey proceeds in its treatment of Öçalan and its Kurdish population as a whole is bound to play a key role in determining the outcome of its efforts to join the EU.

The Kurdish problem is but one symptom of a more general weakness of Turkish democracy. Although the plight of the Kurds has tended to receive the greatest international attention, other groups outside the official mainstream of Turkish society—Islamic activists, ethnic and cultural minority groups, and intellectuals on both the left and the right—have all, at one time or another, been silenced by the Turkish state. The root of this intolerance is to be found not in the character of the Turkish people or their political leaders but in the very nature of the Turkish state. This state is based on a conception of "nation-building" that calls for standardizing the citizenry to make them Turkish in language and nationality, secular in orientation, and obedient to the state. Such a conception naturally leads to the denial of diversity and the repression of any other expression of group identity. The Turkish official mentality invariably confuses unity with uniformity. To understand why the contemporary Turkish state exhibits these features, it is necessary briefly to trace the origins of the Turkish republic in the decline, defeat, and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

The Roots of the Problem

Under the Ottoman Empire, nationalities were defined in terms of religious affiliation rather than ethnicity. Turks were part of the Muslim "nation," and Turkishness was not a political phenomenon. It was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—when non-Muslims as well as non-Turkish Muslims began clamoring for independence and the Ottoman Empire became a hotbed of nationalist uprisings—that the notion of Turkishness assumed political salience: It may be said that Turks learned about their Turkishness from other ethnic groups struggling for sovereignty.

After fighting on the losing side in World War I, the Ottoman government was compelled by the victors to accept the Treaty of Sevrès, which divided its former empire along ethnic lines. There was little opposition to the separation of Ottoman areas outside the Turkish heartland of Anatolia...

THE KURDISH QUESTION IN TURKEY

Doğu Ergil

Doğu Ergil is professor of political sociology at Ankara University in Turkey and president and director of the Center for the Research of Societal Problems (TOSAP), an Ankara-based nongovernmental organization created to address the tensions between Turks and Kurds. The author of numerous books on Turkish-Kurdish relations and reconciliation, including Turkey's Encounter with Herself (1997) and The Eastern (Kurdish) Question (1995), he was a visiting fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies in 1999–2000.

One of the greatest obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Turkey has been the country's treatment of its Kurdish citizens. Although Kurdish is the mother tongue of as many as one in five inhabitants of Turkey, the government prohibits the teaching of Kurdish in schools and the broadcasting of Kurdish radio and television programs. These restrictions attest to a continuing refusal on the part of the Turkish state to recognize the cultural identity of its Kurdish citizens, a policy that has generated widespread discontent among the country's Kurds. Although about half the Kurdish population of Turkey now lives in other parts of the country, the rest are still concentrated in their ancestral region in the southeast, where they predominate. This region has had a long history of Kurdish insurrections, but none so deadly as the struggle waged during the past two decades by the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), led by Abdullah Öcalan. Though precise figures are difficult to come by, there is little doubt that more than 30,000 people have lost their lives in clashes between government security forces and PKK militants.

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