# Sustainable Democratization and the Roles of the U.S. and the EU:
# Political Islam and Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey

*Sustainable democratization has to be foremost a domestic transformation based on domestic consensus. In regard to political Islam and Kurdish nationalism, which involve complex questions of identity, democratization in Turkey requires time and domestic debate. The EU and the U.S. have significant long-term interests in assisting this process by acting as firm but judicious anchors: They should avoid promoting culturally or historically essentialist values and be non-intrusive in areas with weak domestic consensus. Domestic actors should pursue domestic consensus, formulate versions of nationalism that are more compatible with liberal democracy, and design policies to gradually improve state-society relations.*

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hat can the EU, the U.S. and the Turkish government and society do about two contentious issues, political Islam and Kurdish nationalism, with a view to advance democratization? I refer to democracy here both as a means to resolve these questions and as a goal in itself. These two issues have traditionally been major stumbling blocks for Turkish democracy. Among other reasons, this is because they are ideologies competing with mainstream state institutions for Turkey's heart and soul, that is, identity. They thus conflict with these institutions over domains that easily gain zero-sum qualities. Such domains include the country's social and political "mainstream" in a cultural-discursive and political sense, the nature of her national identity and culture, and, in the case of the Kurdish conflict, territory.

This is not to say that these are inherently irreconcilable zero-sum conflicts or that Turkey cannot resolve these questions within a liberal democracy. On the contrary, only effective liberal-democratic institutions and farsighted political and bureaucratic actors can resolve these issues in a sustainable way and without endangering secularism and territorial integrity. The point is that these are tough questions where time and a favorable external environment can help a great deal. For democratization, it is necessary but insufficient for Islamists and Kurdish nationalists to become more 'moderate' in the sense of embracing the rules of democracy and being open to compromise. Ultimately, it will also require that the Turkish state and society develop more diverse and flexible images of what it means to be Turkish, modern, and Muslim; and, all this will have to happen not by decree but through inclusive democratic processes and debates. Over time, these may lead to the evolution of more pluralistic or liberal versions of Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms, and of more liberal conceptions of being a secular Muslim.[1] Thus, democratization in these areas has to build on social and political processes that are primarily of a domestic nature.

Such an achievement would take Turkish modernization to the next stage in which Turks would feel more secure in taking on EU values and commitments. This would also have a major positive impact on the world by showing that a predominantly Muslim state can successfully develop with a liberal and pro-western democracy. External anchors can help the domestic process of democratization in many important ways if they act judiciously. In order to understand how, the role of the external actors needs to be better conceptualized.

### *How do External Anchors Work?*

Sustainable democratization, like sustainable economic development, has to be foremost a domestic transformation rooted in internal changes and pacts or consensuses. This statement is easily supported by extreme cases. Take the failures of the U.S. imposed regime change in Iraq or the collapse of the democratic government in Lebanon where both a weak democratic state and (arguably) civil society depended on the mercy of external actors.[2]

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[1] This issue is often discussed in terms of the emergence of "new actors," thus leading to the politicization of the question. More important than the question of which actors will emerge and which will recede may be the emergence of new ways of thinking among existing actors, which can result from changing political-economic conditions and intellectual debate.

[2] Externally *imposed* democracy succeeded in examples such as post-War Germany and Japan. These were helped, however, by the humiliating defeat of the authoritarian domestic forces in the war, and these countries' earlier experiences of nation- and state-building.

This is not to say that external influences cannot contribute to domestic democratization. EU-assisted democratization worked quite well in Mediterranean countries like Spain and in former communist countries of Eastern Europe, where there had been widespread societal consensus on the bankruptcy of prior authoritarian regimes and on the desirability of integration with Western Europe. Since 1999, Turkey's EU candidacy and relationship with the IMF has also helped to create major improvements in the country's democracy and economy. However, in comparison to the above examples, the consensus in Turkish society on the flaws of authoritarianism (e.g. the military's influence on politics) is weaker. One reason for this may be that authoritarian regimes in Turkey were not as long and as harsh as they were in these other countries: Despite all interruptions and imperfections, Turkey has sustained a multiparty democratic system since 1946. And, in the eyes of the public, democratic institutions have not yet proven themselves to be capable of resolving complex identity conflicts such as political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. In summary, then, external anchors can help democratization but we need to understand how exactly they interact with domestic actors to advance democratization. In very brief forms, the following theses can be offered.

External anchors work if and when the domestic momentum for reform is already there. They help in two ways. First, they help to tip the balance of power in favor of reformers in a particular area whenever there is a close balance between the reformers and conservatives. Second, external anchors work by offering economic-political stability whenever uncertainty keeps many would-be reformers as conservatives. This second mechanism also works economically by encouraging domestic and foreign investors to make more, and more long-term investments. If this trickles down to people as jobs and prosperity, change becomes more popular. In both cases, the domestic will for reform has to be there already, and the external anchor facilitates its execution.

What does this analysis say about how external and domestic actors should behave?
- Ideally, in helping democratization, external anchors should start in areas where there already is significant domestic momentum and the chances of success are high. After the benefits of reforms in these areas are realized, domestic support for reform may catch up in other areas.
- In areas where domestic debate and consensus are weak on democratization, external anchors should abstain from pushing for change. Instead, they should focus on helping reformers to dissipate scepticism and shift the public opinion in favour of change. While doing this, they should abstain from promoting values that would reinforce the divisions preventing a domestic consensus.
- Domestic actors should not expect external actors such as the European Court of Human Rights to resolve thorny domestic questions such as the banning of headscarf or turban in university campuses, by external decree.[3] They should keep pursuing a domestic consensus and know that any change lacking such consensus would be short-lived.

*Identity Politics and Turkish Modernization*

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[3] Note that there is terminological disagreement on what the object of the ban is. The proponents of the ban tend to call it "turban" and argue that the object of the ban is not the traditional headscarf, but its use as a political symbol. The opponents of the ban tend to call it "headscarf" and argue that the ban affects the students' personal religious choices.

Despite Turkey's EU process and significant progress on democratization in general, political Islam and Kurdish nationalism remain highly contentious issues preventing firm political consensus on democratic rules of the game. Why do issues continue to cause conflicts that make people distrust democracy and look for authoritarian solutions?

Political Islam and Kurdish nationalism are two political ideologies and movements that have challenged the cornerstones of Turkish modernization, secularism, and "Turkishness," (as an identity) the most since the foundation of modern Turkey. One of their defining features is that they both can be seen as examples of identity politics. Each seeks the reinvention, remaking, and recognition of a socially or historically given identity that they claim to be an integral part of one's self-image and lifestyle. But there is nothing ancient about either movement. Both are mainly home grown products of Turkish modernization, although they have been influenced by their counterparts outside Turkey, i.e. Islamism in the world and Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, Iran, and Europe. Their ideological roots can be traced back to Ottoman attempts of modernization and state centralization in the 19th century. Since the foundation of modern Turkey in 1923, political Islam and Kurdish nationalism evolved in response to the radical transformation that Turkish modernization entailed. More direct linkages to the current political mobilization of these ideologies can be found in the 1960s. During this period, social mobility, urbanization, and geographical mixing increased significantly in Turkish society, as a result of industrialization and a liberal-democratic constitution.

Two important qualities distinguish modern Turkey's state and nation-building reforms from other projects of modernization/westernization in countries from Afghanistan to North Africa, many of which were partly inspired by it. First, from the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish state took over a deep seated state tradition and the memory of being an imperial center. The latter created a sense of self-confidence and importance (from having had a multinational empire), as well as a sense of insecurity and guilt (from losing it). Unlike the British and perhaps more like the French, Turks could not negotiate the disintegration of their multinational empire but lost it through weakness and defeat vis-à-vis the great powers of Europe.

Second, since the foundation of modern Turkey, Turkish modernization has pursued a *double-transformation*: It was aimed at transforming both the social-private and public-political domains of a predominantly rural and conservative Muslim society. The aim was to create a secular nation and nation-state that would be on par with their counterparts in Western Europe. Underlying this approach was a feeling that '*traditional'* Islam and culture were among the major culprits preventing development. Thus, for example, in addition to eradicating the Sharia from political institutions and the penal code, Turkish reforms entirely westernized the civil code. Unlike earlier Ottoman westernization efforts, Kemalist reforms did not stop at establishing new secular schools, but secularized the whole educational system by abolishing all religious schools except for those training *imams*. Sufi brotherhoods, which had been used to play important social functions, were abolished, although many survived and were revived after 1950.

Initially the aim of these reforms seems to have been to make religion a private, personal affair between individuals and God. As the difficulties of this became apparent, however, the focus shifted to controlling it.[4] By building on the Ottoman state's ways of controlling religion but radically extending their reach, all clergy of Islamic Orthodoxy were made civil

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[4] Şerif Mardin, *Türkiye'de Din ve Siyaset [Religion and Politics in Turkey]*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2002).

servants, thus giving the state a near-monopoly over the provision of religious services. In addition, the clergy were now tasked with preaching a rational and personal version of Islam with no ambition to play a role in politics and economics. For example, state-employed *imams* are not supposed to use their sermons to promote a political party or economic practices such as 'Islamic' or interest-free banking.

Kemalist reforms also tried to replace social and political traditions and symbols. It is remarkable that the official symbols of the Turkish state have very little continuity with the Ottoman. This is despite the fact that the Ottoman *raison d'etat* (and the aforementioned sense of self-importance and insecurity) prevailed on an instinctual level, although Turkey sees itself, and is seen as, the only heir of the Ottoman state. Nevertheless, until the 1980s, anyone showing excessive interest in Ottoman history, symbols, and traditions publicly carried the risk of being considered retrogressive. Such interest was revived in new generations for whom the Ottoman past was securely distant and by conservative governments that encouraged symbolic neo-Ottomanism.

Comparing Turkey's present level of socioeconomic and political development to that of other predominantly Muslim countries in the region, one may infer that such radical reforms served Turkey well. They produced a dynamic modern society and a basically secular and democratic state and political order. However, with these achievements came a hefty price which also underlies some important present deficiencies of Turkish democracy. One price comes from the state establishment's well-developed survival instincts. When faced with societal change, the reflexive reaction of the state institutions is to try to protect their own status by controlling change, rather than to regulate it for mutual benefit.[5] The other price needs further explanation, which is summarized below.

### *Culture and Turkish Modernization*

Simply put, the problem that the founding elites of Turkey were faced with was how to replace the roles that Islam and tradition (including the Ottoman dynasty and vernacular, and the Caliphate) used to play in areas such as: legitimization of the state, ensuring the integration of Muslims of different ethnicities and local cultures, and providing regulation and inspiration in people's private and social lives. The major substitute ideologies that Kemalist reforms were able to offer were scientific positivism and Turkish nationalism, along with a moderated and state-supplied version of Islam.[6] A middle class absent, the major agent of change was the state, which had very limited economic means to instigate domestic capital accumulation and rapid modernization encompassing rural Turkey.

These initial conditions then limited Turkish democracy's later ability to transform itself into a liberal democracy by becoming more inclusive and pluralistic. The formative characteristic has been the central role that a particular type of Turkish nationalism played in this project, and this nationalism's complex relationship of competition and cooperation with religion.

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[5] This is the much-talked about state-centered nature of Turkish modernization. Since the 1980s, it has been giving way to a more society-centered model.
[6] While sanctioning freedom of conscience and banning religious influence on legal-political affairs, Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution also tasks the state with overseeing all "education and instruction in religion and ethics." Article 136 instructs that the Directorate of Religious Affairs will "aim at national solidarity and integrity."

The perceived need to replace the roles of Islam and tradition in social lives seems to have led to an emphasis on common culture and identity in defining national unity. But the very nature of culture and identity is that they are fluid and multifaceted. Unless it was accepted that they can have different meanings for different groups in society, the emphasis on common culture and identity was destined to exclude some in society. This problem was reinforced by the fact that their dominant definitions did not emerge through gradual evolution and/or inclusive democratic processes but through war and top-down revolution.

### Equal versus Same Rights

The emphasis on a non-differentiated image national culture and identity as the glue of social and political life creates cognitive barriers to embracing diversity by defining equal but asymmetrical rights within the context of liberal democracy. An example is the decisions of the Turkish Constitutional Court during the 1990s in regard to political parties charged with ethnic separatism. These reveal that for the justices there was little difference between the promotion of social-cultural differentiation (through 'new' group categories and special rights) and the promotion of social-political polarization and territorial disintegration. As a result, they tended to interpret acts and statements that would be viewed in Western Europe as radical forms of identity politics or multiculturalism (for example, peaceful proclamation of a distinct Kurdish people as a historical-cultural nation within Turkey) as separatism.[7]

The constitutional definition of Turkishness remains one based on citizenship, and all citizens enjoy equal rights in the sense of enjoying the *same* rights. On one hand, this should be seen as a major achievement. Thanks to these same rights, for example, upward mobility has been open to Kurds willing to keep their ethnicity private and apolitical. From business and politics to arts and academia, the Turkish establishment includes numerous ethnic Kurds, whom the larger public would recognize without necessarily paying attention to their ethnicity. The local newspaper of possibly the most prosperous neighborhood of the country highlighted this recently with an article about the "white Kurd" residents of *Nişantaşı*.[8] On the other hand, when coupled with standardized images of nation and culture, the principle of equal rights fails to develop these same rights in order to accommodate ethnically or locally specific needs. Individuals with different backgrounds can be equal in the sense of having the same basic rights yet have different needs and demands based on different conditions, including their diverse identities. Turkish democracy has a hard time recognizing such conditions.

### The Roles of the Military and the West

The Turkish military sees itself and is seen by significant segments of society as one of the founding institutions of the republic and the main guardian of the three crucial values of Turkish modernization: Democracy, secularism and the political and territorial integrity of the nation-state. If compelled to choose between them, however, the military tends to rank democracy behind the other two. Despite significant differences across individual officers and

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[7] Another important issue on which the Court differed from its western counterparts in most cases was the very thin line it drew between the *idea* of separatism and actively promoting or pursuing it. For a critical evaluation, see Ergun Özbudun, "Siyasi Parti Kapatma Davalarında Türk Anayasa Mahkemesi ile Avrupa İnsan Hakları Mahkemesi Arasındaki Yaklaşım Farkı [The Difference in the Way the Turkish Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights Approach Cases Regarding the Shutting Down of Political Parties]," in *Siyasi Partiler ve Demokrasi [Political Parties and Democracy],* (Ankara: Ankara Barosu Yayınları 2006), pp. 83-106.

[8] "Beyaz Kürtler [White Kurds]," *Nişantaşı*, Vol: 1, No: 10 (June 2004), pp. 10-11. The term "white Kurd" makes a reference to the term "white Turk," which journalists such as Ufuk Güldemir concocted to satirize the Turkish upper-middle class.

time, in general, the military does not hesitate to weaken democracy by directly or indirectly interfering with politics whenever it deems that civil political actors are failing at safeguarding secularism or political-territorial integrity. Similarly, the military favors Turkey's EU membership but seems ready to postpone, and in an unlikely worst case scenario even to forego, membership, if it perceives that the membership process endangers these values.

One may agree with the military in that the *basic* principles of secularism and territorial unity are prerequisites for democracy. This is a point that most scholars of democracy would agree with. However, the military seems to overlook that in the long run only a truly inclusive and consolidated democracy based on a civil consensus can safeguard these two principles. Thus, the military's interventions have served to reinforce Turkish democracy's deficiencies by allowing insufficient time for civil institutions to build such a consensus on their own.

During the 1920s and 30s, Turkish elites tried to create a zealously westernizing nation, which, however, was to be autonomous of the West economically and institutionally. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the same elites chose integration with the West through membership in institutions from NATO to the EEC. During the 1980s, this decision was taken to a new level by opening up to the global economy and by seeking membership in the EC and EU.

These western commitments contributed to, but never ensured, democracy in Turkey. Siding with the West was a major motive for the political elites deciding on the transition to multiparty democracy in 1946. But the new Democrat Party could not have been so successful in elections if there had not been significant domestic demand for popular democracy. Western alliances did not prevent military interventions in 1960, 1971, and 1980 either, which were made possible by insufficient domestic consensus on democratic values and procedures. Neither did Turkey's formal application in 1987 for EU membership prevent a semi-coup on the Islamist-led government in 1997.

But Turkey's western commitments helped in two very important ways, one political-economic and the other cognitive. Partly thanks to its alliance with the capitalist West during the Cold War, Turkey was able to maintain a capitalist economy, though it was state-dominated. This gradually led to the emergence of sizeable entrepreneurial and middle classes. Then, the economy's integration with the world economy after the 1980s led to the emergence of new entrepreneurial classes who were less dependent on the state and on the domestic market, and had vested interests in a non-authoritarian and western-oriented democratic system.

Second, on a cognitive level, both religious and non-religious Turkish elites have learned from and have been inspired by western democracies, thanks to their western and western-oriented identities, and access to the western world. This learning has occurred through intellectual interest, which the Turkish government, education system and media encouraged. It also occurred through the thousands of Turkish citizens who worked or studied in Western Europe and the U.S.

### Political Islam

The question of secularism in Turkey is so contentious because it is not only about separating religion from state affairs and ensuring freedom of conscience. State affairs were largely

separated from religion, and the state controlled religion, even in Ottoman times. There is not much disagreement over the *principle* of the freedom of conscience either, which the constitution guarantees. Beneath the seeming disagreements over the borders between the state and religion, or over the freedom of conscience, lies contention over an identity question: what it means to be a secular-modern or 'progressive' Muslim.[9] Whether it is a ring or a headscarf or turban, lifestyles become the markers of different claims to this identity.

The major principles of Turkish secularism are designed to 'defend' the public sphere against the type of religion that is deemed 'traditional' or backward, with a view to create a more enlightened culture and a more enlightened religious identity. The example of the ban on headscarves or turbans in universities may be revealing. The major motive behind the ban does not seem to be the creation of a neutral public sphere. Rather, the motive seems to be two-fold. The first one is to protect from competition the state-promoted Islam, which does not necessarily teach Muslims to be less religious but to have much less willingness to demand a public-political role. It has been noted for example that proponents of the ban include those who feel that the public visibility of women wearing headscarves or turbans threatens their own Muslim identity, which they deem to be more secular.[10] The second aim seems to be to discourage socio-economic relationships where Islamic networks and Islamic-conservative community relations play a dominant role. This strategy has merit insofar as the ways in which Islamic social-political networks operate are incompatible with the more impersonal and rule-based relationships that Turkish modernization efforts tried to create, albeit with limited success.[11]

Thus, underlying the present political conflicts over Islam's visibility is a competition over modern public-political space. Simply put, on one side are mainstream state institutions and the segments of society that embrace the less visible Islam promoted by the state. On the other side are the 'moderate' Islamic-conservative groups, which, unlike more 'strict' Islamists, eagerly pursue worldly success by participating in modern life.[12]

Turkish Islamists have shown significant success in reconciling with modernity and displaying political- intellectual change. One should note that the historical-philosophical roots of Islam in Turkey provide opportunities for compatibility with modernity. Having played historically a predominantly social-cultural role rather than a political role, Turkish Islam produced values emphasizing inner and social peace, and coexistence with other faiths, as well as with a powerful, worldly state.

Turkish Islamists have benefited from their ability to participate in democracy and public-political sphere, largely by coming to terms with Turkish nationalism. Islamists have produced numerous variants that are also Turkish nationalist to differing degrees. This has enabled Turkish political Islamists to contest elections as members of various center-right parties as well as by forming explicitly Islamic parties, which has given rise to further ideological moderation and differentiation. Significantly, coming to power in local

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[9] This includes questions of secularism as well as laicism. For terminological simplicity, I will only use the term secularism.

[10] Menderes Çınar, "Kültürel Yabancılaşma Tezi Üzerine [On the Cultural Alienation Thesis]," *Toplum ve Bilim* [Society and Science], No: 105, 2006, p. 160.

[11] For insights, see interview with Şerif Mardin by Derya Sazak, "İslamcılığı Unutmuyor Bir Yana Koyuyorlar [They are not Forgetting Islamism Just Putting It Aside]," *Milliyet*, 28 February 2005.

[12] For an insightful discussion, Massimo Introvigne, *Turkish Religious Market(s): A View Based on the Religious Economy Theory,* in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti (*Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006).

governments during the 1990s taught Turkish political Islamists the realities of real world politics and economics, making their aims and strategies more secular.

However, political Islam's participation in Turkish democracy has been far from being fully free. Rather, the Turkish experience has been a story of mixed incentives or what can be called *conditional participation*: Participation in democratic politics limited by broadly-identified secularist boundaries and sanctions (by the judiciary and military) when these boundaries are crossed.[13] In fact, eight of the ten political parties that were founded after 1946 and could be considered Islamist were shut down either by the Constitutional Courts or by military interventions. However, the last five of the closed parties survived for an average of about 6.5 years, during which time they contested elections and came to power in coalition governments.

The breaking point in the moderation of Turkish Political Islam in the sense of adaptation to western democracy seems to be what is called the "February 28 process." This refers to a process of a vicious media campaign and social protest against the government in 1997, with the military's urging and active involvement. As a result of this process, the coalition government led by the Islamist Welfare Party was compelled to resign. This experience had two significant consequences. First, it led many Islamist or Islamic-conservative politicians and their constituency to become convinced that they would never be allowed to govern freely unless they made significant changes in their political aims and strategies. These politicians included founders of the now ruling Justice and Development Party AKP, such as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül. Second, it generated a sizeable class of disenchanted Islamist politicians and intellectuals. They came to understand through personal experience the importance of western standards of democracy and political liberties. Many began to look to the EU as an inspiration. In fact, the current Speaker of the Parliament Bülent Arınç said in an interview that it was "the February 28 process which made him pro-EU."[14] Indeed, in its discourse, program and governing practices, the AKP has been incomparably more favorable to liberal democracy and the EU than its predecessors had been.

This transformation could probably not have happened if it were not for two developments. First is the aforementioned experience in local governments and the intellectual vibrancy of the Islamic civil society since the 1980s. Second is the emergence of a significant Islamic-conservative class of industrialists, as a result of the economic liberalization since the 1980s. This dynamic and ambitiously export-oriented entrepreneurial class is shifting Turkey's economic point of gravity from Istanbul toward the emerging urban hubs of Anatolia. Constituting a major constituency for the AKP, this Muslim-conservative class favors a stable and democratic, non-interventionist state that is respectful of their lifestyles and favors globalization and EU-integration with a view to attract foreign investments.

In the social sphere, the AKP is pursuing a gradualist Islamic-conservative agenda. Its impact occurs directly through government toleration or support of Islamic-conservatism, as well as indirectly through the perception of its Islamic identity in society. These generate increasing political tensions, especially with President Sezer and the military. Rather than finding a new

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[13] There are many issues such as the headscarf or turban issue where these boundaries are hard to define, which partly explains the difficulty of the question. This creates a major political cause and asset for Islamic-conservative actors.

[14] Interview with Murat Yetkin, "Beni 28 Şubat AB'ci Yaptı [February 28 Made Me Pro-EU]," *Radikal*, 5 June 2005.

definition of what it means to be a secular and modern Muslim, perhaps the solution to these tensions may lie in a model that allows for more flexibility and individual diversity.

## *The Kurdish Question*

Since the beginning of modern Turkey, the Kurdish question has been mired in a vicious circle of separatist violence and disregard of Kurds 'as Kurds,' i.e. not only as Turkish citizens but as citizens who may have specific identities and wants as Kurds. How can this vicious circle be broken today? "*Demokratikleşme*" (Democratization) is the answer commonly given by such different people as Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals, Kurdish or Arab businessmen from the Southeast, the truck driver on the road from Diyarbakır to Urfa, or members of the DTP (Democratic Society Party), a legal political party close to the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party). [15] But what is democratization and why is it so difficult to implement in the case of the Kurdish question?

In the context of the Kurdish question, democratization means different things to different people. It is an intuitively understood and vaguely stated concept. But at bottom it seems to be used in two interrelated yet separate senses. The first sense regards a political expediency: "Non-humiliating" ways in which ordinary PKK members and the pro-state militia can disarm and join civil life. The second sense regards a long-term and formative problem: The need for more democratic 'state-society relations' between the state and its Kurdish citizens. This entails the demand for a government that is more responsive to the society's demands, more attentive and respectful of human rights, and more effective and less security-conscious in areas from education to socio-economic development. Importantly, it also entails the demand for the recognition of peaceful Kurdish nationalists as people worth listening to and talking to about what Kurds want.

What makes democratization in the first sense above so difficult is the difficulty of separating it from another issue: the PKK elite's efforts to gain recognition as the speakers of Kurdish interests, perhaps alongside disarmament in return for some kind of an amnesty for their past activities. The problem is the moral and political difficulty of legitimizing a separatist movement that fought the state for years by using terrorism. Since 1984, the PKK conflict is thought to have cost the lives of more than 35,000 people. This makes it hard for any mainstream political party to negotiate any amnesty without risking a high price in public opinion and in civil-military relations. The possibility of limited amnesty is now being discussed. [16]

Two problems make democratization in the second sense above difficult: the ambiguities over what Turkish Kurds want, and the conceptual gaps that exist between Kurdish nationalists' and the rest of the society's understanding of the Kurdish issue.

## *What Do Kurds Want?*

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[15] Note that unless I state otherwise as in 'ethnic Turk,' I use the terms 'Turk' and 'Turkish' as national categories which refer to people whose primary national identity is Turkish. Thus, 'Turkish intellectuals' may include ethnic Turks as well as ethnic non-Turks who are Turkish nationals. In the Turkish language the term *Türk* has multiple meanings. Depending on context, it can mean a Turkish national or someone 'from Turkey,' an ethnic Turk or a member of a Turkish-speaking ethnic group, or a member of a Turkic nation.

[16] See, for example, the interview with the head of the Turkish nationalist DYP (True Path Party), Mehmet Ağar. *Sabah*, 9 October 2006. It remains to be seen how this bold effort will affect DYP's popularity. See also the interview with the head of the DYP Diyarbakır branch, *Birgün*, 13 April 2006.

Time and domestic debate are needed to enable the silent majority of Kurds to resolve the ambiguities over what Kurds would want under a more responsive government. In public and private statements, Kurdish actors in Turkey voice a wide variety of sometimes contradictory interests. 'Goals' such as democracy and implied secession may even be expressed by the same person in the same talk.[17]

The ambiguities partly result from the fact that group interests may remain opaque or take exaggerated forms unless they are transformed into well-articulated and realistic demands through participation in democratic processes. In the case of Turkish Kurds, PKK violence and repressive state policies and practices did not allow this. Until the 1990s, Kurdish members of clientelistic Turkish political parties acted neither 'as Kurds' nor 'of Kurds' but simply as representatives of their provinces. It was anathema to express any demands in the form of 'about Kurds'. Under the iconoclastic leadership of first-Premier-then-President Turgut Özal (1983-1993), a number of movements of identity politics such as feminism and *Alevism* were mobilized in Turkey.[18] He was also more sympathetic to Kurds' interests than any other Turkish leader before him.

Could non-violent, urban forms of Kurdish identity politics have evolved in this period, when Turkey was opening up to the outside world, became more pluralistic, and applied for EU membership in 1987? Such a path was closed by two developments. First, there were the excesses of the 1980-83 military regime, which indiscriminately cracked down on Kurdish nationalists alongside any other opposition. Second, there was the PKK's separatist terror, which began in 1984 and developed into a de facto war during the 1990s. The ensuing polarization of politics and direct and indirect links to the PKK led to the expulsion of Kurdish nationalists first from the social democratic SHP and then from Parliament. Six legal Kurdish parties that were established during the 1990s were shut down by the Constitutional Court for "supporting separatism," each with an average life span of less than three years.

The vagueness of Kurdish demands may also result from the contingent nature of ethnic-national demands based in identity grievances. Put simply, as long as ordinary Kurds feel that they need some kind of statehood -or a separatist movement- to prove that they are Kurdish, separatism is likely to have some popular basis. This is much less likely if recognition of identity is much less of a problem for Kurds within a consolidated liberal-democratic system. This point requires some clarification.

However it displays itself, arguably, what lies at the heart of Turkish Kurds' political mobilization is the longing for recognition. By its very nature, the feeling of recognition is produced not by concrete ends but by the processes leading to it. It is not necessarily produced by specific rights or policies, as in the number of hours of Kurdish education. Rather, it depends on how policy makers on all levels explain the intentions underlying these policies: whether they convey respect and understanding on the part of the state toward its Kurdish citizens' identities and perceptions. The longing for recognition does not have to be met in radical ways. If explained well to the public, it can be met by establishing asymmetric rights of equal citizenship, i.e. equal but not necessarily same rights (based on local and culturally specific needs) explained above. Would the political and bureaucratic representatives of the state be willing to embrace such a task? Facing a nationalist public opinion and a strong

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[17] In a recent article, Kurdish intellectual T. Ziya Ekinci classified Kurdish groups into seven groups based on their demands. See "Kürt Bölgesinde Toplumsal Yapı ve Kürt Aydınları [Kurdish Intellectuals and the Social Structure in the Kurdish Region]," *Birikim* No: 209, September 2006.
[18] Özal also had Kurdish ethnic background.

sensitivity against the PKK, would they be able to recognize and cooperate with peaceful and 'moderate' Kurdish actors during the process?

### *Conceptual Gaps*

Currently, such communication and cooperation remain difficult because of the wide cognitive gaps that exist between the perceptions of Kurdish nationalists and the "*majority society's*" knowledge and understanding of the Kurdish issue.[19] Such gaps undermine any cooperation between mainstream political actors and moderate Kurdish actors who renounce violence. In fact, on some issues, the concepts and values that some peaceful Kurdish actors think with are more 'radical' (in the specific sense of difference from the values and concepts of mainstream actors) than those the PKK uses. These issues include the definitions of the Turkish and Kurdish group identities, the meanings of sovereignty and citizenship, and the roles Kurds played in the making of Turkey. Suffice it to give one example below.

In talking and writing about issues such as democratization, Kurdish nationalists directly or indirectly refer to two major ethnic-linguistic nations that form Turkey. In the past, there was a long time when the Turkish government could not even tolerate any talk of Kurds. Today, recognition of Kurds as an ethnic group is no longer an issue, but talk of a Kurdish nation is. At first, this may just seem to be about Kurds but in fact it is also about a 'Turkish question': It is also about Turks, i.e. Turkish nationals of various ethnic backgrounds who simply self-identify as Turks. Turkishness is simultaneously an ethnic-linguistic category transcending Turkey's borders and a national-territorial category that emerged when former Ottoman Muslims living in Turkey were joined under a nation state in 1923. If ethnicity and culture are grounds to be a separate people with separate rights, what about the numerous other indigenous people of Anatolia who are considered Turks?[20]

Theoretically, this should not be a problem because there is no group other than Kurds that makes such demands and contests the Turkish identity as a national identity. Neither is there any evidence that all groups recognized as a 'people' or 'nation' in a cultural sense automatically want a nation-state, especially in the realm of the EU. Nevertheless, the talk of an ethnic Kurdish nation raises profound problems. Legally and politically, such talk is 'illogical' according to the system's republican principles of one nation, one state. Psychologically, it generates resistance because it raises questions about Turkishness itself. To overcome these barriers, Turks (and Kurds) will have to come to terms with the fact that national identities can have multiple definitions and can mean different things to different people. They will also have to see themselves as a culturally and religiously more diverse people and be more secure with that self-image.

### *What Can Domestic Actors Do?*

Until 1999, the continuation of the war with the PKK had restricted Turkish governments' abilities to address the identity-related and socioeconomic dimensions of the Kurdish conflict. It was hard to separate them from the 'security' dimension, i.e. separatist violence and the

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[19] With *majority* society I refer to people with no Kurdish background as well as Kurds who are assimilated into the mainstream society or well-integrated with it and view themselves as Turkish nationals/citizens as well as ethnic Kurds.

[20] Members of the Christian minorities who are Turkish nationals should also easily be considered Turks. But the aforementioned cultural content of Turkishness creates cognitive barriers in their social and political recognition as such. This is another important weakness that Turkish democracy has to address.

possibility of a hostile Kurdish state in Iraq. Then, the PKK's leader Öcalan was captured, the PKK ceased its hostilities and the EU declared Turkey a candidate for membership. This was a major opportunity. Indeed, the post-1999 period has been one of relative peace and democratization, unprecedented since the 1970s but well short of the expectations of the wide variety of Kurds living in Turkey. The achievements since 1999 -such as the legalization of broadcasting in Kurdish and the shift to civilian government in the region where the law of emergency prevailed previously- should not be underestimated. But these reforms do not appear to have created a major shift toward more trusting and responsive state-society relations in the Southeast. Why?

The PKK threat was still present. But also, sufficient domestic debate -either within the state or within society- had not occurred on the Kurdish question. A related issue was the inability of the weak Kurdish civil society to openly renounce violence. When these factors were coupled with the worst financial crises in the country's history in 2000-2001, democratization has been limited even after a weak coalition government was replaced in 2002 with a single party government. After 2004, the domestic will to engage in debate and reforms especially within the security establishment, was further weakened when attention shifted again to security issues. This was mainly caused by the uncertainties in Iraq and the gradual resurgence of the PKK violence.[21] The instability of Iraq and the PKK's presence there continue to undermine democratization in Turkey.

Despite the escalation of violence last summer, the current period offers some opportunities for a variety of reasons. First, there is much more domestic debate on the Kurdish question within the majority society, from novel and more liberal, liberal-nationalist, and liberal-conservative perspectives.[22] The debate includes a number of joint efforts by Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals to rethink the question from more humanistic and democratic perspectives and to make concrete proposals for reconciliation.[23] Second, in September, the PKK declared a 'ceasefire,' once again, which was preceded by a call by the DTP to do so. This may start a long run process resulting in the ability of legal Kurdish parties to credibly dissociate themselves from separatist violence and gain recognition in the eyes of the state.[24] Third, there is more hope now that the U.S. will take some serious measures against the PKK presence in Northern Iraq. Fourth, and most importantly, nobody, not even the PKK, seems to want a return to the violent days of the 1990s. People seem to instinctively understand and fear that this time such a path may lead to a Turkish-Kurdish conflict, i.e. not only a conflict between the state and Kurdish separatists as the conflict previously was, but which involves ordinary people. Kurdish individuals and civil society—such as the declaration by the Southeast Industrialist Businessmen Association (GÜNSİAD) have taken bold steps to renounce violence and call for economic and democratic reforms.[25]

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[21] For a discussion, see Murat Somer, "Failures of the Discourse of Ethnicity: Turkey, Kurds, and the Emerging Iraq," *Security Dialogue* Vol.36, No.1 (March 2005).

[22] For a recent widely-read book, see Mustafa Akyol, *Kürt Sorununu Yeniden Düşünmek* [*To Rethink the Kurdish Question]*, (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2006).

[23] For example, see the declaration made in July 2006, which resulted from a two-day meeting attended by intellectuals of various backgrounds in June. "Bu Benim de Meselem [This is My Problem Also]" *Milliyet*, 31 July 2006; and the brainstorming sessions organized by the *Zaman* newspaper: "Ortak Akıl Toplantıları 1-2 [Common Sense Meetings]," 12-13 October 2006.

[24] See Murat Yetkin, "Ralston'un Gizli Mesajı [Ralston's Secret Message]," *Radikal*, 30 September 2006.

[25] Nizamettin Kaplan, "İşadamlarından PKK'ya Ateşkes Çağrısı [Call for Ceasefire from Businessmen to the PKK]," NTV-MSNBC, 23 August 2006. Available at*: http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/382554.asp*, 15 October, 2006. Also see comedian Yılmaz Erdoğan's public plea to end violence. "Yalvarıyorum [I am Begging You]," *Hürriyet*, 24 July 2006.

For domestic political actors, a wise strategy now would be to pursue a *two-track* long-term strategy. One track should focus on addressing the security dimension, by fighting separatist violence. But a second track should focus on building more democratic and "humanistic" (sensitive to human needs as opposed to state security and power politics) state-society relations between the state and its Kurdish citizens. This track should be pursued independently from what happens in the first track. This is necessary to avoid the impression that the state holds ordinary citizens responsible for the PKK. Ultimately, this is the only way that the potential of separatism and separatist violence can be weakened in the Southeast in the long run.

The following are four areas in which the government and other political actors can take realistic steps toward progress, in the face of the upcoming national and presidential elections.

- Conceptually, the crucial challenge for domestic political actors is to seek more humanistic and democratic approaches to the conflict and formulate them in terms of national interest. In other words, tell the electorate why such approaches are not concessions to either the PKK or the EU, but rather policies that serve the electorate's own interests by strengthening democracy, political-territorial integrity, economic development, and foreign relations.

- Given Turkey's aforementioned history of nation-building and global trends, nationalism is likely to remain a strong dimension of domestic politics. Thus, intellectually, it is important to highlight that different and more democratic types of nationalism are possible. Whether one can define different types of nationalism, such as social-democratic or liberal nationalism, will continue to preoccupy long academic debates. However, in practice it makes a big difference whether people follow *liberal* or *conservative* nationalist principles. The former would encourage one to imagine the national identity as a type of compatriotism. Its content can change through democratic deliberation. The latter would encourage one to imagine national identity as an authentic identity rooted in history, religion, ethnicity, or culture. Its content is thus much less open to change.[26] Thus, conservative nationalists respond to the aforementioned challenges to the Turkish national identity defensively. The more flexible image of national identity that results from liberal notions of nationalism allows more flexible reactions by imagining more diverse conceptions of the nation.

- Government policies of a conservative-nationalist nature as defined above, such as not allowing local governments to give Kurdish names to public properties, for example streets and parks, alienate Kurdish citizens by giving the impression that their identity and mother tongue are seen as a security threat. More flexible policies, such as allowing such names to be cited in both Turkish and Kurdish (and in some cases Arabic), may help a great deal in eliminating the lack of trust and understanding in state-society relations.
- The Southeast is not the only underdeveloped region of Turkey. However, the socioeconomic underdevelopment of the Southeast has special conditions that require urgent attention and administrative specialization. These conditions range from the legacies of the war with the PKK (for example, street children and unusually high urban unemployment in places like Diyarbakır, and the repopulation of the villages depopulated during the war with the PKK), to language issues (e.g. low education levels

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[26] Among others, David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

partly caused by the absence of bi-lingual education materials), to the proximity of the region to the war-torn Iraq. In addition, policies in areas such as education, energy, industry, and even border security, need to be better coordinated. Thus, a special developmental agency with its own budget, headquartered in physical proximity to the problems in the region and coordinating all socioeconomic policies—perhaps to be organized in connection to a much better administered GAP project—would be very useful. Perhaps most important would be the psychological impact: good will and determination on the part of the state toward the well-being of the people in the region. Such an agency should not operate in a way that would weaken the local governments and civil society. It should cooperate with them, and *vice versa*. Given Turkey's financial difficulties, EU funds can help a great deal.

- The feeling of distance from and lack of political representation in the central government is a prevailing feeling among people in the region. An important reason for this feeling is the 10 percent electoral threshold in national elections. This practically disables explicitly Kurdish (or for that matter, regional) parties from entering Parliament. Given the fact that no mainstream party is interested in uniting with explicitly Kurdish parties, this creates an important democratic deficit. This deficit should be expected to feed Kurdish and/or Islamic radicalism in the region. One obvious way to address this deficit is to decrease the national threshold. If it is desirable to keep the threshold and discourage small parties overall for the sake of political stability, alternative ways could be:
  o a second national ballot with proportional vote that is exempt from the threshold rule;
  o a new rule that any party that wins the plurality vote in a certain number of electoral districts will be allowed to enter its candidates from these districts to Parliament, regardless of the national threshold.

It would strengthen rather than weaken Turkish democracy if any of these changes were made in the election laws before the pending decision of the European Court of Human Rights on the threshold issue.

### *Turkey's Democratization and the Current External Context*

On its face, Turkish democracy has more external support than ever. The EU accession process formally began in October 2005. However, the external environment looks less favorable for democratization when one considers the level of the mutual commitment and 'understanding' between the EU and Turkey, and the developments in the world at large.

Economically, both the advanced and developing world economies are growing relatively fast while the emerging economies are expanding their share and weight. [27] However, perhaps in a related way, politically the world is going through such a period of diverging perceptions and interests that it took little notice of a recent military coup in Thailand.

The prevailing political-intellectual atmosphere in the world is discouraging. Rather than seeing religious and ethnic divisions through the lenses of universal principles such as democracy and human rights, it seems that the world is preoccupied with redefining these principles through the lenses of these divisions. Since 11 September 2001, the tendency,

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[27] "A Survey of the World Economy," *Economist*, 16 September 2006.

especially in the U.S., has been to regard democracy and human rights less as universal principles than as culturally specific goods, as in the concept of 'Muslim democracy'. On one hand, talking about culturally specific democracies may seem a good thing because democracy should be allowed to take indigenous forms. On the other hand, this may lead to the application of lower standards and expectations to democracies in predominantly Muslim countries, reinforcing the perception of the world through assumed civilizational dichotomies.

Within the major external anchor of Turkey's democracy, the EU public is doubtful and ill-informed about the benefits of the country's membership prospects. In March-May 2006, 48 percent of the EU25 public said it would oppose Turkey's membership even if Turkey fulfils all the requirements. [28] This unfavorable public opinion may be open to change over time, and it is not so much worse than the public opinion towards previous candidates of enlargement, until 2003 for example, close to 40 percent of the public opposed the entry of the Baltic countries.

In the case of Turkey, however, these skeptical views are accompanied by an *essentialist* public-political discourse that opponents of Turkey's membership use, especially in countries such as France and Austria. This discourse opposes Turkish membership on historical and cultural-religious *identity* grounds which are portrayed as incontestable and unchangeable. Such rhetoric receives widespread coverage in the Turkish media and feeds suspicions that the EU will never accept Turkey. This essentialist discourse seeps into European documents on identity politics in Turkey, reinforcing the tendency to treat identities as frozen in history and culture.

Take the recent Council of Europe report on Kurds, prepared by Lord Russell-Johnston and approved by the Parliamentary Assembly. There is nothing wrong with the Council discussing the cultural situation of the Kurds and encouraging Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria to cherish the Kurdish culture as "part of the heritage of their own country." Europe rightly criticized Turkey in the past for denying the expression of the Kurdish identity and history. However, most of the report is historiography. The oddity is impeccable: European politicians rather than academics discuss history and 'approve facts' such as: "by the 3rd century BC, the Aryanization of the mountains was virtually complete…from [that time] until the 16th century Kurdish culture remained basically unchanged despite the introduction of new empires, religions and immigrants… Judaism appears to have exercised a much deeper and more lasting influence on indigenous Kurdish culture and religion than Christianity… Several centuries of Turkic nomadic passage through the region rained havoc on the settled Kurds [but] the Turkic cultural legacy was in itself nil."[29]

One cannot help but wonder which scholarly means of testing and expertise the Council has to verify these statements. One also wonders whether seeing ethnic-religious identities from such an essentialist-historical perspective can help to resolve identity conflicts. Scholars embrace essentialism at their own peril because their views and evidence are checked by that of other scholars. When politicians embrace it, it only undermines their institutions' authority.

Years ahead, we may determine that the decisive blow to the EU's credibility in Turkey as a promoter of liberal democracy came on 12 October 2006 when the French Parliament decided

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[28] "Attitudes towards European Enlargement," *Special Eurobarometer 255*, July 2006. Only 39 percent would favor Turkey's membership under these conditions.
[29] "*The Cultural Situation of the Kurds. Report 11006,*" ,
http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc06/EDOC11006.htm , 7 July 2006

to indulge in policing historiography. The Parliament voted to make it a punishable crime to express the thought that the Armenian tragedy, a century ago, might not amount to genocide. The reactions in Turkey overshadowed Orhan Pamuk's achievement of becoming the first Turk to win a Nobel Prize on the same day.[30]

Meanwhile Turkey's accession process seems to be marred by the seeming difficulty of balancing the interests of an EU insider, the Greek Cypriots, with that of the outsider Turks. European elites have been unwilling or unable to formulate Turkey's membership in ways that matter enough to the European public. In comparison, the U.S. seems more cognizant of the long-term regional and global implications of Turkey's European identity, and continues to support Turkey's EU membership. Yet, Turkish-American relations are going through a tough period, mainly because of conflicting interests in Iraq, and because of the U.S. own predicaments there.

Within Turkey, public support for the EU is declining, distrust of the American government is overwhelming, and upcoming elections within a year or are draining the Turkish government's reformist zeal and courage. Globalization and integration with the EU raise fears of losing sovereignty to the outside world and feed nationalist sentiments. In addition, worries about Iraq's territorial integrity and the possibility of a major confrontation between the western world and Iran activate risk-averse attitudes toward the outside world. Coupled with rapid economic growth at home, many Turks begin to look with more interest at the Russian, Chinese, or even Iranian paths, which they perceive to be less democratic but more autonomous of the western world. Since Turkey's geography and political-economic history are different from these countries, this interest may be more mental than real. But these sentiments have an impact on specific policy decisions as we saw in the case of the Turkish Parliament's rejection in March 2003 of support for the U.S. campaign in Iraq. Overall, it would be wrong to assume that Turkey cannot pursue alternatives other than the West.[31]

### The Need for Firm Commitments

Turkey's EU prospects display an interesting divergence between the *ex ante* and *ex post* interests of Turkey as well as that of external actors such as the EU and the U.S. Both EU members and Turks instinctively understand that Turkey may never become a full member of the EU. Among other reasons this is because the EU has to decide how deeply integrated and 'Christian' it wants to be, which requires difficult choices between prosperity versus security, and global influence versus national autonomy. Nevertheless, both the EU and Turkey have compelling reasons to pursue the membership process, as the U.S. has an interest in supporting it. This is because a great deal of the joint benefits from Turkey's European integration flows from the transformation of Turkey *during* the process. *Ex post*, once this transformation is complete, it may matter less whether or not Turkey becomes a full member. Paradoxically, the realization of these tri-partite gains during this process requires that all sides maintain a full, *ex ante* commitment to the goal of membership. The *content* of this commitment, which includes the arguments and values, based on which Turkey's membership is promoted and, the extent to which the EU and the U.S. understand Turkey's internal politics (and vice versa), is as important as its existence.

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[30] Incidentally, Orhan Pamuk had infuriated many in Turkey by saying to a Swiss newspaper that a million Armenians were killed in Turkey.
[31] Among others, see Denis MacShane, "Patronizing Turkey is A Dangerous Game for Europe," *Financial Times*, (11 October 2006,) p.11.