

The patronising embrace: Turkey's new Kurdish strategy

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The Sixth of October 2006 is not going to make it into the textbooks of Turkish history. On this day, the council of the central Diyarbakir borough of *Suriçi* voted unanimously for a project called 'Multilingual Municipality Services'. The mayor, Abdullah Demirbas of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) justified the proposal with a reference to the district's majority of Kurdish speakers and the prevalence of other languages such as Arabic and Armenian. Many of the residents are indeed of rural origin and have fled to Diyarbakir during the Kurdish uprising in the 1990s. Their Turkish is often too patchy to fully benefit from services of the municipality. At the same time, the idea went, Diyarbakir's multi-cultural and multi-lingual past merits a publicity campaign that lives up to the diversity of its past, exemplified by the surviving Armenian, Chaldaean and Protestant Churches and the many historical mosques in the old town.

Demirbas's experiment with 'multilingualism' and public services in Kurdish could have marked a departure from Turkey's assimilatory policies towards its Kurdish citizens. It could have been a step towards a genuinely inclusive policy based on the acknowledgement and recognition of difference, a step in full conformity with the spirit of EU-induced legal reform packages and with European standards of human and minority right. Alas, it was not to be: Abdullah Demirbas was dismissed from office and faced with a barrage of court cases. The Council of State, the country's supreme administrative court, deemed the municipality's project unconstitutional, while members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) denounced it as an attack on Turkey's territorial indivisibility.¹

This essay examines Turkey's Kurdish policy since 2002 and discusses the prospects of legal Kurdish politics under the current government. It argues that after six years of reform politics by successive AKP governments, two years of EU accession negotiations and heightened expectations for progress, developments indicate a suspension of reform and a shift towards polarisation. Turkey's Kurds are now caught between the promise of a better material life and Islamic charity politics on the one side and the prospect of hardening discrimination and exclusion on the other. To be admitted to the emerging space of AKP-supported material wealth, Kurds are urged to renounce the Kurdish nationalist movement and its identity-based politics as presented by the DTP.

1. The mirage of reform: The AKP's Kurdish policy since 2002

Most analysts have expected that the Justice and Development Party under Prime Minister Erdogan would depart from Turkey's traditional Kurdish policy that has been wavering between assimilation and clientelistic co-optation. A closer look at the period since the AKP's first election victory in November 2002, however, suggests that the party's greatest asset has been the absence of an explicit Kurdish policy. What the AKP government did have was a different rhetoric and an implicit policy: Less inspired by Turkish ethno-nationalism than by a notion of Muslim solidarity, it followed the Gulen movement's recommendation of moderate Islam as antidote to Kurdish nationalism.² Ignoring Kurdish demands ranging from the right of education in Kurdish,³ to the termination of all regulations limiting the public use of

¹ At a debate in Parliament on 11 January 2008, DTP MPs criticised the impeachment of Demirbas. Justice Minister Mehmet Ali Sahin, in turn, accused the DTP of ignoring the constitutional order and of violating Para. 3 of the Constitution that stipulates: "Turkey is an indivisible unity with its state and nation and its official name is Turkish" (Cf. <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?newsid=93467>).

² For a partisan description of the Gulen's Kurdish strategy, see: Mehmet Kalyoncu (2008), *A Civilian Response to ethno-religious conflict. The Gulen movement in Southeast Turkey*, The Light, Somerset, N.J.

³ When Erdogan met members of civil society during a visit, the Chair of the Diyarbakir Bar, Szegin Tanrikulu, inquired whether reforms allowing for education in the Kurdish language could help easing the current conflict. He responded: "There are not only Kurds in Turkey. What if tomorrow, the Cherkez or Laz ask for the same? Everyone will demand it. How are we going to sustain unity then?" (<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2008/01/06/siyaset/axsiy03.html>)

Kurdish, the government briefly considered and then discarded the idea of a general amnesty for armed members of the PKK. Rather than engaging with Kurdish representatives and acknowledging the existence of a political conflict, it went for pragmatic problem management, misunderstood by many as a major softening in Turkey's security-minded Kurdish policy.

The introduction of limited broadcasting in minority languages and private language courses, hailed as a first opening by liberals and as a dangerous first step towards the erosion territorial integrity by critics, was an important legal change with immediate relevance for the Kurdish community. Yet, it was not the incumbent AKP government that passed this key reform package, paving the way for Turkey's EU membership negotiation, but the coalition led by the late Bulent Ecevit, which voted in this package just before the November 2002 elections.⁴ The AKP government managed to take the credit and create a narrative of democratisation that impressed liberals at home and analysts abroad, while in reality it shied away from even the most timid steps towards recognition of Kurdish concerns.

Normalisation or delusion? The first AKP government

November 2002 seemed to herald a new beginning: After almost two decades of the Kurdish Uprising (*Serhildan*) and violent conflict between the Kurdish-nationalist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*) and Turkish security forces,⁵ a fragile peace was taking hold. In place since the 1980 military intervention of 12 September, the state of emergency regime was abrogated in all Kurdish provinces by the end of 2002, ending more than twenty years of arbitrary rule by military and security forces.⁶ It should be noted that the lifting of the state of emergency was a decision not of the newly incumbent Erdogan government but of the preceding coalition government under Bulent Ecevit.

Released from the tight grip of the 'State of Emergency Regional Governorate' (*Olaganustu Hal Bolge Valiligi*), residents of the Southeast experienced, for the first time in almost a generation, basic freedoms like travelling without regular identity controls and road-blocks. In the large cities of the Southeast, where passers-by disappeared from the streets at sunset -due to curfews or fear of arbitrary detention- urban life was slowly restored to its pre-1980 vivacity, even though places like Diyarbakir or Batman were bursting with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. Despite the poverty, squalor and erosion of traditional social institutions in these cities, however, there was a remarkable relaxation of authoritarian policies and softening of attitudes among members of the security forces.

The lifting of the state of emergency also opened the way for a more self-conscious Kurdish associational life. The Kurdish municipalities, through cultural activities, concerts, film festivals etc. contributed to the emergence of a new public sphere.⁷ For the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, urban space emerged as a venue for the negotiation and formation of Kurdish identity. The images of incessant violence and bloodshed, with which the region was hitherto remembered were replaced, at least in some part of the Turkish mainstream media, with images of a cultural revival beyond conflict. Some even thought that a substantive settlement including a general amnesty for PKK combatants was in easy reach.

⁴ This reform package also included the abolishment of the death penalty that allowed for PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's death sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment.

⁵ The war left more than 37,000 dead, including civilians, and up to 2 million internally displaced in the Kurdish areas and western Turkey. Not less than 2,000 villages were destroyed by security forces or PKK units. It ended, tentatively, with the capture, by Turkey, of Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999.

⁶ The last provinces, where emergency rule provisions were in place until September 2002, were Diyarbakir and Sirnak, the former the symbolic capital of Kurdish politics and the latter one of the hotspots of Kurdish military resistance, situated on the Iraqi border.

⁷ Zeynep Gambetti (2004), *The Conflictual (Trans)Formation of the Public Sphere in Urban Space: The Case of Diyarbakir*, *EUI Working Papers*, 2004/38.

The sense of normalisation, even if in the absence of legal reform of any consequence, was consolidated with the decision of the European Union in December 2004 to begin accession negotiations. The subsequent start of EU membership talks in October 2005 appeared to be the final indicator that Turkey was on the path to reform, a process that would ultimately benefit the Kurdish constituency. For a brief period, a window of opportunity emerged, bringing together the military establishment, the moderate Islamists of the AKP, Kurdish Nationalists, Alevites and large segments of the Turkish electorate on a platform for EU membership. Powerful as it might have seemed, though, the zenith of this unexpected coalition was already surpassed: A forceful nationalist backlash, orchestrated by rogue elements within the state and the military, had been in the making for some time. TV series, movies and historical novels began to reinstate a sense of Turkish superiority that had to be defended against internal and external enemies. Leading members of the military got increasingly vocal about the risk of EU membership for Turkey's integrity. Local chapters of extreme nationalist organisations regrouped with retired generals, nationalist lawyers and rightwing extremists to instil anti-Kurdish sentiment at the funerals of Turkish soldiers killed by the PKK.⁸

End of normalisation: The Diyarbakir events of 29 March 2006

Violence in the Kurdish provinces never ceased completely: Low-level armed conflict in some areas continued after the end of emergency rule, yet fighting was largely confined to rural areas. The most serious blow to the feeling of normalisation was the death in combat of fourteen PKK fighters on March 29, 2006. It set in motion a circle of violence that could well be defined as the 'return of a state of exception'.⁹ Security forces killed at least fourteen demonstrators, all but one in Diyarbakir. Many of the victims were young men, yet three were children under ten years of age, who got caught up in the street fights. In the following wave of detentions and prosecutions, two-hundred children were taken into custody and around ninety were charged with participation in illegal protests.

The Diyarbakir events of March 2006 did not only mark the end of normalisation and the return to a politics of violence. They also signify an important rupture for Kurdish legal politics. Osman Baydemir, Diyarbakir's prolific DTP mayor had intervened together with the deputy Governor to persuade the rioters to go home. Yet, he was booed out. The next day, the Turkish mainstream media scolded him for supporting the rioters. At the same time, dozens of local DTP Chairmen and members were arrested on charges of terrorism.

Mounting crisis, elections and the Daglica affair

The March events were followed by a bomb blast in September 2006 that killed seven in the city -mostly children- and a growing number of casualties in armed conflict between the security forces and the PKK.¹⁰ With increased conflict and attacks of PKK troops from the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the General Staff prepared for cross-border operations to contain PKK action.¹¹ Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, however, postponed the operations, giving the impression to his potential Kurdish voters that his government was opposed to the incursions. Subsequently, in the elections of July

⁸ The ongoing *Ergenekon* investigation suggests that a tightly-organised network of retired generals, members of the army, the security services and the mafia might have been behind many of assassinations and nationalist murders of the recent years (<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=132507>).

⁹ Kerem Oktem (2006), Return of the Turkish "State of Exception", *Middle East Report Online*, June (<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero060306.html>)

¹⁰ Most of the casualties occurred in the Kurdish provinces, yet on 28 May 2007, six members of the public were killed in the centre of Ankara by a bomb planted by a terrorist with PKK links.

¹¹ First speculations on a cross-border operation on Iraqi territory appeared in Turkish newspapers towards the end of May 2007.

2007, the AKP made substantial inroads into the Kurdish provinces, where it trumped the DTP in all but the most nationalist strongholds.

Despite a Turkish - Iraqi security pact and increasing US - mediation, PKK attacks continued after the elections. They culminated in the killing of twelve soldiers and the capture of eight at the Iraqi border near Daglica, in October 2007. Probably for the first time in Turkey's recent history, centrally organised nationalist mobs attacked and vandalised DTP party offices, Kurdish businesses and neighbourhoods in western and central Turkish cities. Yet, when the eight soldiers were released in November, public opinion reacted not with relief but with disdain. The Justice Minister accused the troops of voluntary surrender to the PKK, while the media singled out Private Ramazan Yuce as traitor, because of his Kurdish origins.¹² Following the handover ceremony including DTP Member of Parliament Fatma Kurtulan, they were interrogated and detained. Kurtulan was subsequently charged with membership in a terrorist organisation. Amid jingoistic media reports on the Daglica affair, the Turkish air force began its attack on PKK positions in Northern Iraq on November 13.

2. The politics of disengagement: The DTP in isolation

Until the July 2007 elections, analysts continued to give credit to the AKP's discourse of reform and democratisation and to sympathise with the party's struggle against the secular establishment. Yet, Turkey's political prospects have changed significantly. Nationalism and racism have made the country's western cities much less hospitable to Kurds, Christians and immigrants. Parallel to the growing anti-Kurdish and anti-minority sentiment and an increasingly jingoistic mainstream media, the space for legal Kurdish politics has become ever-more limited, both in the Parliament and the municipalities.

Kurdish-interest politics in Turkey have always operated at the very margins of the political system, and parties were subject to exclusion, prosecution and often prohibition. The Constitutional Court has so far closed down all parties with a Kurdish-nationalist orientation, with a court case pending against the DTP since November 2008. Not unlike Sinn Fein and the IRA or Harri Batasuna and ETA, the DTP and its predecessors have maintained organic links with the PKK, which impeded its democratic credentials and its credibility in the eyes of the Turkish mainstream. Yet as Nicole Watts¹³ argues, despite the constant threat of closure on the one side and the interference of the PKK command on the other, these parties have also provided a resource for the Kurdish national movement and a potential avenue for integration into the Turkish mainstream.

The Politics of Disengagement

The DTP, however, has had to face an exclusionary approach by state agencies, the military and the government that amounts to a disengagement of the state and the Erdogan government from a legal Kurdish party.¹⁴ The politics of disengagement proceeds on a number of levels:

- On the level of state agencies: Non-cooperation with DTP municipalities,¹⁵

¹² Despite the heavy-handed allegations of treason, the eight soldiers were acquitted of all serious crimes by a military court in February 2008. The mainstream newspapers and TV, which had denounced the captives as traitors, failed to follow up on the story and referred to their acquittal only in passing.

¹³ Nicole F. Watts (2006): *Activists in office: Pro-Kurdish contentious politics in Turkey*, *Ethnopolitics* (5/2).

¹⁴ The mayor of Metropolitan Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir, argues that the party and its members never had to face as much harassment as under the two successive AKP governments (Interview, 10/01/2008).

¹⁵ DTP mayors believe that the Ankara bureaucracy discriminates against them, when it comes to the distribution of funds and the cooperation over projects. Baydemir suggests that state agencies have suspended all projects that might ameliorate living conditions in Diyarbakir (Interview, 10/01/2008). One should note, however, that such discrimination is not limited to Kurdish municipalities but is sometimes also employed against mayors of other opposition parties.

- On the level of representatives of the military: Active non-engagement with DTP members, especially during national celebrations,¹⁶
- On the legal level: Court cases against mayors for minor offences like speaking Kurdish during public service¹⁷ and against Members of Parliament.¹⁸

The Ministry of Interior has been following DTP municipalities suspiciously, containing projects or policies that could have an explicitly Kurdish agenda. An emblematic case is the aforementioned project of 'multi-language municipality services' by Suriçi Mayor Abdullah Demirbas.¹⁹ His project was a modest step to make public services more accessible for the poor and disenfranchised immigrants in his district. Many of the residents arrived in Diyarbakir as internally displaced people in the 1990s with almost no possessions and no skills for the urban labour market. Especially older women still speak only little or no Turkish. Much of the project including information campaigns or wedding ceremonies in Kurdish were geared towards them. To be fair, the municipality's children's journals in Turkish and Kurdish, the Kurdish-language theatre and a children's council did act on the notion of empowering Kurdish identity and giving the language a higher level of visibility and legitimacy. Yet, all these projects, one should stress, are in full conformity with European human and minority rights and would have to be implemented anyway, if Turkey was to stay on its course for EU membership.

Yet, the cooperation between the government and the judiciary that led to the impeachment of Abdullah Demirbas shows that such reforms will not be tolerated if attempted by the DTP. Investigators of the interior Ministry prepared a file against the mayor. Three months after the municipal council had voted for the multi-language project, the Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu called upon the State Council (*Danistay*) for the dismissal of mayor Demirbas and the dissolution of the municipal council. In May 2007, the State Council's eighth chamber decided in favour of the ministry's request, dismissing the mayor and dissolving the council.²⁰ The opinion of the court stated:

"... [the fact that the municipality] employed local languages used by the district population other than the official language Turkish is in clear violation of the constitution and other laws and is not in conformity with the realities of our country.

Since the language of education in our country is Turkish and all literate Turkish citizens can read and write in Turkish, there can be no conceivable justification for the provision of municipality languages in a language other than Turkish...

The attempt to turn local languages into official languages with a project for a multi-language municipality is in clear violation of the constitution and legal provisions (Translated from the opinion of the Eighth Chamber of the State Council, 22/05/2007).²¹

¹⁶ A particularly blunt example of such disengagement was the 2007 Chief of the General staff reception for the Victory day on 30 August to which the DTP was not invited. When DTP Chair of the Parliamentary group, Ahmet Turk, remarked that this exclusionist behaviour amounted to 'separatism', the Chief Prosecutor in Ankara started proceedings to have his immunity revoked. Baskin Oran and other liberal intellectuals took up the issue. (*Radikal*, 11/01/08, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=244132>).

¹⁷ An interesting case is Osman Baydemir's new year's card in three languages (Turkish, Kurdish and English) that also led to prosecution.

¹⁸ Mayors in Tunceli (Songul Erol Abdil) and Diyarbakir (Abdullah Demirbas, Osman Baydemir) complain that they are overwhelmed with court cases that keep them from their daily commitments (Interviews, 9-10/01/2008). Osman Baydemir now has 150 investigations and fifteen pending court cases. He has to attend the Prosecutor's office at an average of twice a week (10/01/2008).

¹⁹ Cf. Meline Toumani's well-researched NYT article (17/02/2008). <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/magazine/17turkey-t.html?scp=1&sq=Demirbas&st=nyt>.

²⁰ After an appeal by Demirbas, the court reconsidered the case in August 2007, yet validated the decision.

²¹ "...resmi dil olan Turkcenin disinda belde halki tarafindan konusulan yerel dilleri kullanilmasi yukarida belirtilen Anayasa ve yasa hukumlerine acikca aykirlilik teskil ettigi gibi ulkemiz gercekleriyle bagdasmamaktadır. ... Zira

The decision suggests that the judges have not taken into account the spirit of the EU-induced reforms and EU human and minority rights standards. They disregard the entitlement to public services and education in minority languages, as stipulated *inter alia* by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. It would be next to impossible for the judges to uphold the ruling, if they reasoned within the context of European legal norms. Yet, the ruling also seems to sit uneasy with those reforms of the initial EU-reform package of the Ecevit government that had paved the way for limited broadcasting (by the public broadcaster!) and language education in Kurdish and other local languages.²²

3. The double bind of compassion and exclusion

Given the discussion in the preceding section on the limitations of legal Kurdish politics, a set of questions emerges: Which political space remains for the DTP under these circumstances? Is there a strategy behind the politics of disengagement? And, how does this strategy relate to the AKP's Kurdish policy?

In the eyes of a majority of the Turkish public and mainstream media, members of the DTP, whether in parliament or local government, are seen as the PKK's front office. The resulting isolation by Turkey's political mainstream, despite its decidedly non-nationalist, even conciliatory approach has also led to a weakening of the DTP's legitimacy in the eyes of Kurdish nationalists. Prevented from delivering in the realm of legal politics and unable to control disenfranchised Kurdish rioters, the DTP has reached a point where its politics are too accommodationist for its own constituency and not sufficiently assimilationist for the Turkish mainstream.

It can be said with a degree of certainty that in the current situation, there is an ad-hoc coalition between the military, the conservative legal elites and the AKP regarding the disengagement from the DTP and the Kurdish nationalist constituency it represents. The military high command and the legal establishment are known for their disdain towards the public expression of any ethnic and religious identity that deviates from the republican identity project,²³ hence their attitude is not surprising. What is indeed startling is that the AKP, who in the past has often presented itself as critical of the military and lamented interference by the legal establishment, would be so fully acquiescent.²⁴ In fact, the AKP has been actively supporting the politics of disengagement. The party's main motivation seems to be to consolidate its inroads into the Kurdish areas and to replace, in the 2009 local elections, the DTP mayors. To achieve this goal, the AKP seems to be ready to squeeze the DTP out of the space of legal politics by launching investigations, by eroding the party's legitimacy and by creating conditions under which a municipality cannot operate successfully.

Yet, this is only one aspect of the government's strategy that also makes use of AKP networks²⁵ and their 'politics of charity', targeting disenfranchised Kurds with services from Islamic charity organisations, a

ulkemizde eğitim ve öğretim dili Türkçe olduğuna göre ve okuma yazma bilen Türk vatandaşları Türkçe okuyup yazabildiklerine göre Türkçe dışındaki dillerde belediye hizmeti sunulmasının hiçbir makul gerekçesi olamaz... [Yerel dillerinin] çok dilli belediyeçilik gereğiyle resmîleştirilmesi Anayasal ve Yasal Kurallara açıkça aykırılık teşkil etmektedir."

²² This is particularly interesting as Turkey has been an ardent supporter not only of Kosovo independence but also of the introduction of Turkish as official language in three municipalities of Kosovo.

²³ Baskin Oran defines the founding element of republican identity as secular, Hanefi, Sunni, Muslim and Turkish (<http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=1226>).

²⁴ AKP MP's are on record to have likened the DTP repeatedly as an extension of the PKK. PM Erdogan has repeatedly urged DTP leaders to disassociate themselves from the PKK, insinuating that there is no place in parliament for a party that perceives of the PKK in terms as a 'political organisation' (<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2008/01/08/son/sonsiy16.asp?prm=0,421890569>).

²⁵ Organisations close to the Fethullah Gulen, who is highly influential on the government's Kurdish policy, play a particularly important role. Charities like *Denizfeneri* (Lighthouse) and *İnsani Yardim Vakfi* (Foundation for Hu-

discourse of Muslim brotherhood and a promise of economic development.²⁶ Commenting on a recent occurrence in Adana, where a local police officer appeased rioting children by handing out bananas, Ece Temelkuran coined the label 'Islamist Banana Politics'.²⁷ She suggests that Kurds in the Southeast are cut off their political struggle, while being subjected to a politics of charity that turns Kurds into a needy and pitiable group.

Yet, the AKP social policy is not limited to symbolic acts of charity: For a majority in the Kurdish provinces, as elsewhere in Turkey, services ranging from the provision of social housing, free schoolbooks and better access to the health system have had a positive impact on people's daily life. While this is not a strategy that responds to the demands of the Kurdish movement, it does have an impact on the quality of people's every-day life, in Turkey in general as for many in the region.

Conclusion: No alternative to Europe?

Turkey's Kurds, especially those living in the Southeast, have a marginally better life today than at the beginning of the millennium. Cities like Diyarbakir, Van or Batman, heavily affected by the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees are in the early stages of urban normalisation. New social housing projects, extended health and educational services and social benefits are available to the urban poor. At the same time, the progress towards broader human and minority rights and a more deliberative democratic regime has come to a deadlock. Many Kurds are left to choose between a Kurdish movement that appears emasculated and the AKP promise of a better material life in the bonds of Muslim brotherhood.

Having won the 2007 elections, the Erdogan government will not resuscitate a reform process that would respond to the longstanding demands of the Kurdish national movement and hence alienate the more nationalist factions within the AKP. Without the prospect of EU membership, the patronising embrace through charity and limited community rights seems sufficient, and hence even modest progress on issues such as education in Kurdish unlikely. If the AKP delivers on its promises of regional economic development and consolidates the work of sympathetic Islamic charities, it could win over a growing number of disaffected Kurds. This would be a return, albeit with an Islamic flavour, of the republican policy of clientelistic co-optation for those ready to forswear the idea of a secular Kurdish identity, and exclusion for those who do not.²⁸

A darker scenario would see Turkey released from the universe of mutual obligations with the EU, and a deterioration of the democratic system, worsened by a continued ground and air offensive against PKK positions in Northern Iraq. Under such conditions, the government would lose its support base among Turkey's Kurds, and eventually also its grip on Turkish politics. Further militarization of Turkish society would almost certainly lead to increased levels of ethnic conflict and terrorist attacks in western cities and coastal regions. Radical Turkish ethno-nationalists with increasingly overt support from the security and state apparatus would push disenfranchised Kurds towards terrorist acts, recreating the cycle of violence and retribution experienced in the 1980s and 90s. Such a rupture in inter-community relations would be bound to have destabilising effects.

man Assistance) combine impressive professionalism and efficiency with a mission to win people over for Islam and allay their discontent. (Cf. <http://www.ihh.org.tr/> and <http://www.denizfeneri.org.tr/>).

²⁶ A week after a bomb attack in Diyarbakir killing seven, committed by a man with links to the PKK, eight hundred businessmen close the ruling party flew in to Diyarbakir to promise investment and employment opportunities. This is a very effective and innovative way of politics: Rather than promising state investment, businessmen emerge as semi-autonomous actors for development.

²⁷ Milliyet, 17/02/2007 (<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2008/02/17/yazar/temelkuran.html>).

²⁸ This engagement with minority groups through the double bind of denial of difference and patronising compassion is also traceable in the AKP's Alevi policy (Cf. Kerem Oktem (2008): Being Muslim at the Margins: the AKP and the Alevi, *Middle East Report*, 246).

The “European option” would be based on a genuine recognition of the Kurds as a political and cultural constituent of Turkey and the full implementation of the EU *acquis communautaire* on minority and human rights. It would allow for a decentralization of local government true to the principle of ‘subsidiarity’ and include the use of Kurdish in public service institutions. The legal representatives of the Kurdish movement would be encouraged to engage in Turkish mainstream politics, while an amnesty for PKK fighters would significantly reduce the PKK’s military clout. Under such conditions, the large majority of Kurds would be integrated into the political mainstream, while only splinter groups would cling to armed struggle and extremist violence.

Such a shift in perspective appears feasible within the kind of post-modern, non-confrontational and consensual political culture, which is at least partially characteristic of conflict-resolution within the European Union. At the height of its EU hopes, Turkey might have been on the trajectory towards such a ‘post-modern’ state of affairs. Without a firm EU perspective, Turkey will remain committed to the logic of zero-sum games, power politics and non-recognition, with only very limited incentives to reach out to a minority group, whose aspirations can be contained by other means.

Yet, a policy that ignores the demands of secular Kurdish nationalists and seeks to eliminate the conditions for their legal representation -even if sweetened by the carrot of clientelistic co-optation, charity politics and a discourse of compassion- disregards the considerable transformation of Kurdish society. Until the 1980s, Turkey’s Kurds lived in predominantly rural, socially conservative and parochial communities with little access to education and to the outside world. Today, they are still relatively poorer than the average. Yet, they live mostly in cities and are presented on all levels of Turkish society, from the economic to the cultural sphere. Young Kurds enjoy access to sophisticated trans-national networks of Kurdish politics and identity, often referred to as *Virtual Kurdistan*.²⁹ The Kurdish Diaspora in Europe - itself an outcome of Turkey’s Kurdish policy in the 1980s and 90s- is an additional resource for the trans-national negotiation and formation of Kurdish identity beyond the confines of republican identity politics in Turkey.

It is hardly probable that the AKP’s carrot and stick policy will undo two decades of secular-nationalist Kurdish identity formation by imposing the notion of Sunni-Muslim citizenship with a whiff of depoliticised Kurdish traditions. In the medium-run, there appears to be no credible alternative to acknowledgement and recognition within a ‘European option’.

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²⁹ Nicole F. Watts (2004): *Institutionalizing Virtual Kurdistan West: Transnational Networks and Ethnic Contention in International Affairs*. In: Joel S. Migdal: *States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.