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Turkey's Borderlands, the Syrian Civil War, and the Kurds

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UGUR ÜMIT ÜNGÖR, SEP 22 2015

Turkey's attempt at establishing a 'safe area' or an ISIS-free strip along the northern Syrian border is a recent attempt at formulating a policy towards the civil war in Syria. Not only does this demonstrate a cynical instrumentalization of Syrian suffering (intervention only when and if it suits Turkey's interests), but these moves also carry some echoes from the past by reanimating some familiar themes from Turkish history. One of these is the occasional threat to invade Syria, but another one is the Turkish nation state's preoccupation with ethnic demographics, especially in its borderlands.

Nation-state Formation and Borderlands

Historically, state formation has consisted of a dual strategy: the drawing up of physical and political borders, as well as the construction of ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. Whereas in pre-modern empires, borders were porous zones without the strict surveillance and monitoring of the modern state, two developments changed border management in quite fundamental ways: technology enhanced and continues to enhance infrastructural power over borders, and the rise and spread of nationalism politicized borderland regions as essentially contested.

In the ideal nation state, the population consists of the nation and only of the nation, that is, they coincide exactly: every member of the nation is a resident of the nation state, no member of the nation should reside outside it, and most importantly, in principle no non-members of the nation are to reside in the state. Although there are practically no ideal nation states, total, maximum, or sufficient homogeneity remains a prime ideal of the nation state. Borderlands are spaces where the homogeneity (and thereby the sovereignty) of the nation state are most often challenged, for example in Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria, or Ethiopia.

A 'Safe Zone' in Northern Syria?

Turkey is no exception to the rule of nation-state border construction. From the establishment of the Republic on (and possibly even before), successive Turkish governments have set themselves the task to secure the borders politically and especially ethno-demographically. As both countries' longest land border, the Turkish-Syrian border received special attention. It has alternatively been conceived as a natural frontier where the Anatolian plateau transitions into the Mesopotamian desert, then as a buffer zone against political Islam and especially Kurdish nationalism, and in its latest variation as a 'safe area' for Syrians displaced internally.

There are at least two problems with the currently conjured 'safe area' in Northern Syria, first and foremost credible commitments. The dramatic fall of the 'safe area' Srebrenica in July 1995 taught us the lesson no place should be declared a safe zone, unless there is a robust, sustained vigilance to protect it with overwhelming force. So far, the Turkish army has not lifted a serious finger to deter the Assad regime from its annihilatory violence against civilians right across the border. A safe area would doubtlessly demand direct engagements with the Syrian army (and ISIS), as well as maintaining civil administration and law and order in the area. Using Syrian Turkmen soldiers as proxy peacekeepers is a half-baked response to the problem.

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The second problem is ethno-politics: as a nation-state, successive Turkish political elites have conceived of Northern Syrian society as a series of ethnic liabilities. Turkey is hostile to Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, Alawites, Druze, and other minorities that were ethnically cleansed from Eastern Turkey in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, rather than a 'safe zone', the Turkish Republic's treatment of Eastern Anatolia can be characterized as a 'zone of violence'. Particularly the border region was consistently securitized since 1923. It is a dangerous strip of land, where many people miss limbs due to minefields, vividly portrayed by Yılmaz Güney in his classic movie "The Road" (Yol). In other words: any Turkish 'safe area' in Syria is bound to be a project of ethno-religious homogenization as well.

Echoes from a Past – That Never Really Passed

A strikingly similar logic of ethnic securitization in the borderlands was pursued in the 1930s towards the Kurds. On 15 March 1937, the then Turkish Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya wrote to his superior Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border was too Kurdish. This affinity, or "unity of language, character, and feeling of the people on either side of the Syrian border", he continued, could potentially inspire Kurdish nationalists to make claims to a future independent Kurdistan. Kaya's demographic solution to this security threat was "Turkification" (Türkleştirme): deport Kurds away from the border, and settle Turks in their stead. But the Kemalist regime did not suffice with that. Syria expert Seda Altuğ has convincingly demonstrated how the regime repeatedly requested the French mandate authorities to 'cleanse' the Syrian side of the border of discordant minorities such as Armenians and Kurds.

Those Kurds who were dispossessed, denaturalized, expelled, and permanently exiled from their ancestral villages, then suffered a similar fate on the other side of the fresh border. For four decades, the Arab-nationalist Assad regime ran a similar program of ethnic securitization on their side of the border. From the 1962-63 program to deport Kurds away from the borderlands to the 2004 Qamishli riot and massacre, the Syrian Kurds were subjected to complex forms of "Arabization" (عربنة, ta'rib). They lost their right to work, employment, education, travel, the right to own property, cultivate agricultural land, etc. Besides the methodical similarities with the Turkish-nationalist policies only decades earlier, the objectives too bore the same stultifying characteristics of nationalist homogenization: co-optation, cultural assimilation, deportation, imprisonment, disenfranchisement, and the unrelenting (threat of) violence that always loomed large in the Syrian Arab Republic.

AKP Rule in Turkey: Plus Ça Change...?

When the AKP rose to power in Turkey in 2002, there was widespread hope that the narrow, discriminatory, and exclusivist definition of Turkish citizenship would give way to a slightly broader one embracing all Muslims, including the Kurds. During the elections of 2007 and 2011, the AKP did fairly well in the Kurdish areas, and a significant Kurdish constituency still supports the AKP over the HDP. In cities such as Bitlis or Van, some extended families and tribes are split halfway for each political party. "We are first Muslims, then Kurds", would be a fairly typical attitude of Kurds who support the AKP. This changed in 2015. It appeared that President Erdoğan is an excellent politician, but a terrible peacemaker. Despite the fact that he had a lasting peace accord at his fingertips, he selfishly opted to expand and sustain his power base. If it is peace with the PKK that will empower him, he will make peace with the PKK; if it is war with the PKK that will empower him, he will make war with the PKK. The logic is inscrutable.

The AKP's policies have devolved into an eye-opener, a revelation. Rather than a sustained expansion of the Turkish Republic's 'in-group' to all Muslims, its Syria policy demonstrates that regardless of the government (Republicanist, Nationalist, Islamist), the Turkish Republic seems hardwired to homogenize not only its ethnic differences, but also securitize its borderlands on ethno-nationalist principles. It looks, indeed must look, with unhealthy paranoia, perhaps even a syndrome, at the tiny, landlocked, teetering Republic of Armenia on its eastern border. It refuses to take seriously the Syrian Kurds as political players (on top of its existential suspicion of domestic Kurds), and the Arab Alawis of Hatay are viewed with impeachment and guilt by association.

The Responsibilities of Neighbors

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Mass repression and genocides are often stopped by neighboring countries. Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, the Soviet Union pushed all the way through to Berlin to end Hitler's multiple genocides (and commit a few of their own), and only when the Uganda-backed RPF defeated the Rwandan army did the 1994 genocide end (and expand into neighboring DRC). In none of these cases was the objective of the interventions the ending of the violence against civilians, but nonetheless its result. Had Turkey, possibly in tandem with a regional alliance, taken a much more robust stance against the Assad regime's systematic, categorical violence against civilians in 2011, we would not have had a strong ISIS, obscene levels of civilian suffering, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and disaffected Muslim youth joining jihadist movements. Humanitarian intervention and genocide prevention are often seen as mutually exclusive phenomena. In this case, intervention could have been a form of prevention.

The hackneyed concept of 'conflict spill-over' misses a major point: for countries that share a long land border and overlapping populations with similar customs, 'spillover' is a natural sociological corollary of transnational ties, be it family or tribal. Şükrü Kaya had understood this perhaps better than Turkey's current politicians.

About the author:

Ugur Ümit Üngör gained his Ph.D. in 2009 (cum laude) at the University of Amsterdam. In 2008-09, he was Lecturer in International History at the Department of History of the University of Sheffield, and in 2009-10, he was Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for War Studies of University College Dublin. Currently he is Associate Professor at the Department of History at Utrecht University and Research Fellow at the Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam. His main areas of interest are state formation and nation formation, with a particular focus on mass violence. These interests necessitate a commitment to inter-disciplinarity at the intersections of social science and history. His most recent publications include *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (Continuum, 2011) and the award-winning *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is currently leading a research project that examines the involvement of paramilitaries in counter-insurgency operations, scorched earth campaigns, and mass violence against civilians including the perpetration of mass murder.