TURKEY:
The Kurdish Issue.
Limits of Security Methods

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Abstract: The Kurdish issue is a long-running political problem of the Republic of Turkey. It has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The Republic tries to resolve the issue via its securitization approach. According to this article, the securitization approach would prevent Turkey from resolving the identity rights dimension of the issue. This dimension would be solved by multiculturalist political arrangements that recognize, preserve and promote Kurdish identity in both public and private realms. The securitization approach would be problematic even for the resolution of the armed conflict dimension of the issue. It puts individual Kurds in an awkward position in the Kurdish-populated provinces, where they face various economic, educational and social problems. All these problems may significantly damage the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks, and accordingly, dampen the Kurds' desire for coexistence. Moreover, they may radicalize ethnic Kurds, especially Kurdish youth, who may begin to consider violent methods as the sole way of persuading Turkey to satisfy Kurdish demands, stimulating them to join the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This radicalization would produce a constant and dramatic increase in the number of PKK recruits, making the resolution of the armed conflict dimension of the Kurdish question very difficult.

Keywords: Kurds, Turkey, Armed Conflict, Terrorism, Multiculturalism.

Introduction

The Kurdish question is one of the biggest political problems of the Republic of Turkey. The question has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The identity rights dimension is the result of numerous assimilationist Turkification policies enforced through the cultural togetherness policy – an official policy embraced by the early republican regime, the military administra-

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tions taking up the reins of government in 1960, 1971 and 1980, and their successor governments. The second dimension is the corollary of the armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), an internationally-recognized terrorist organization, that has continued since 1984.[1]

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has made various reforms in order to resolve the Kurdish question by democratic and peaceful means. These reforms have transformed the assimilationist Republic. This had recognized, protected and promoted only Turkish identity – the identity of the majority ethnic group (Turks) – in both public and private domains and banned the recognition, protection and promotion of all minority identities, including Kurdish identity, in both domains. Turkey is now an integrationist republic where not only Turkish but also Kurdish and other minority identities are recognized in the private area, but only the majority identity is recognized, preserved and promoted in the public realm.

The reforms have not, however, resulted in a political resolution to the Kurdish problem. The armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the outlawed PKK is continuing at the time of writing. The Republic is employing security methods in order to resolve the Kurdish issue. In accordance with its securitization approach, Turkey defines the Kurdish question as the PKK problem that threatens its national unity and territorial integrity. The armed conflict dimension of the question might be called 'the PKK problem', but the question also has another dimension – the identity rights dimension – that would be resolved only with multiculturalist political settlements.

The securitization approach would be problematic even for the resolution of the armed conflict dimension of the Kurdish issue. It puts individual Kurds in an awkward position in the Kurdish-dominated provinces, where they encounter numerous economic, educational and social problems. All these problems would damage the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks, and accordingly, dampen the Kurds' desire for coexistence. Furthermore, they may radicalize ethnic Kurds, especially Kurdish youth, who may begin to consider violent methods as the only way of convincing Turkey to fulfill Kurdish demands, urging them to join the PKK. This radicalization would produce a constant and dramatic increase in the number of PKK recruits. In this atmosphere, it would be unlikely for Turkey to end its armed conflict with the outlawed PKK.

This article is organized as follows. In the subsequent section, the article seeks to understand Turkey's Kurdish issue. It then examines the recent transformation process that has rendered Turkey an integrationist republic. Afterward, the article critically

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1   The PKK is recognized by Turkey, the European Union (EU), the United States of America (USA) and many other sovereign states as a terrorist organization. For more details, see http://www.mfa.gov.tr/pkk.en.mfa.

examines Turkey's securitization approach on the resolution of the Kurdish issue and answers why the Republic is unlikely to resolve the issue via security methods.

Turkey's Kurdish issue and its main dimensions

The Kurdish question is a long-running political problem of Turkey that has led to many democratic, humanitarian and economic costs. The question has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The identity rights dimension is the consequence of the Republic's assimilationist Turkification policies, e.g. (1) the definition of ethnic Kurds as Mountain Turks [*Dağlı Türkler*] (Kurban, 2003; Morin & Lee, 2010); (2) the prohibition on the use of the word 'Kurd(s)' (Al, 2015; Heper, 2007; Zurcher, 2003); (3) the ban on the usage of Kurdish in courts and schools (Moustakis & Chaudhuri, 2005; Robins, 1993; Yegen, 2011); (4) the filling of administrative appointments in Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia with ethnic Turks (Kurban, 2004; Villellas, 2013; Yegen, 2009); (5) the prohibition on the use of Kurdish personal and place names (Muller & Linzey, 2007; Yegen, 2016b; Zeydanlioglu, 2012); (6) the confiscation of Kurdish books, films and newspaper (Hughes & Karakas, 2009; Olson, 1989); (7) the ban on the broadcasting, explanation and publication of ideas and opinions in Kurdish (Morin & Lee, 2010; O'Driscoll, 2014; Yegen, 2016a); (8) the forceful deportation of ethnic Kurds from their historic territory to Western Turkey, where they were expected to become assimilated into the dominant Turkish culture (Muller & Linzey, 2007; Xypolia, 2016); and (9) the construction of many boarding schools in the East and Southeast with the task of educating Kurdish pupils in an environment that physically separated them from their cultural habitat (Bilali, Celik & Ok, 2014; Ince, 2012; Yanarocak, 2016).

These coercive assimilation policies were enforced not only by the early republican regime, which ruled the country between 1923 and 1945, repressive Turkification policies were also implemented during the second half of the twentieth century when Turkey witnessed three military coups staged in 1960, 1971 and 1980. In this atmosphere, the outlawed PKK was established in 1978. It carried out its first terror attacks against Turkey in August 1984 by assaulting gendarmerie stations in the provinces of Hakkari and Siirt, resulting in an armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the PKK (Bozarslan, 2018; Gutaj & Al, 2017; Gourlay, 2018).

The armed conflict has not only left at least 50,000 people dead so far, but it has also generated other significant humanitarian costs, including village evacuations, forced migrations, extrajudicial killings and persecutions (Barkey, 1993; Belge, 2016; Calislar, 2013; Candar, 2013). In addition, the conflict has cost the economy at least 300 to 450 billion USA dollars (Ensaroglu, 2013; Yayman, 2011). Even the lowest estimates would enable the Republic (a) to build 30,000 kilometers of expressways (almost fifteen times longer than the current length); (b) to cover its last 80-year health expenses; (c) to open

5 million new classrooms; (d) to build 375 new health campuses identical to the Ankara Etlik Healthcare Campus, the largest health campus in Turkey; (e) to construct 1500 new sports complexes the same as the Afyonkarahisar Sports Complex, the largest sports complex in Turkey; (f) to build 60 new railway tunnels similar to the Marmaray Tunnel, Turkey's Bosphorus sub-sea tunnel linking Europe and Asia; and (g) to construct 75 new dams akin to the Ataturk Dam, the largest dam in Turkey. The list can easily be extended, but what I would like to underscore here is just to demonstrate how the conflict has held back development.

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has made various reforms in order to resolve the Kurdish issue in a democratic and peaceful manner, e.g. i) the abolition of the emergency rule in the Kurdish-dominated provinces (Coskun, 2015; Kolcak, 2015a); ii) the foundation of a compensation mechanism for harm caused by terrorism or fight against terrorism (Kolcak, 2015b; Leezenberg, 2016); iii) the elimination of constitutional and legal prohibitions on Kurdish broadcasting rights (Gunter, 2016; Kolcak, 2016); iv) the establishment of TRT KURDÎ, a publicly-funded television channel broadcasting in Kurdish for twenty-four hours a day (Kayhan-Pusane, 2014; Kolcak, 2015b); v) the authorization of municipalities, private language centers, universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to offer Kurdish language courses (Kolcak, 2016; Weiss, 2016); vi) the authorization of public secondary schools to offer elective Kurdish language courses (Kolcak, 2015a, 2016); vii) the authorization of private schools to form bilingual (Kurdish-Turkish) education systems (Kolcak, 2016); viii) the authorization of public and private universities to offer Kurdish degree programs (Kirisci, 2011; Kolcak, 2015a); ix) the abrogation of the ultranationalist morning oath (*Andımız*) (Kolcak, 2016); x) the removal of legal bans on the use of Kurdish personal and place names (Hemmerechts, Smets & Timmerman, 2017; Keyman & Ozkirimli, 2013; Kolcak, 2015b); and xi) the elimination of legal bans on the usage of Kurdish in courts, prisons and making political propaganda (Koker, 2013; Kolcak, 2015a; Kuzu, 2016).

The above reforms have transformed the assimilationist Republic. Turkey is now an integrationist republic that recognizes not only Turkish but also Kurdish and other minority identities in the private domain. In its public counterpart, the integrationist Republic recognizes, safeguards and promotes only the majority (Turkish) identity and calls on all minority ethnic groups to converge on this identity.

The Republic has some multiculturalist features that enable Kurdish identity to be recognized, secured and promoted in the public area, such as the foundation of the *publicly-funded* TRT KURDÎ; the authorization of *public* secondary schools to offer elective Kurdish language courses; the authorization of *municipalities* and *public* universities to provide Kurdish language courses; and the authorization of *public* universities to provide Kurdish degree programs. All these multicultural policies, however, are exceptions to the characteristics of the integrationist Republic.

The Constitution of Turkey recognizes Turkish as the *only language* of the Republic (Article 3). It hampers *public* schools from using any language other than Turkish as the language of instruction or education (Article 42(9)). In addition, it defines all citizens as Turks by stipulating that "[e]veryone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk" (Article 66(1)).[2] Hence, the phrases 'no Turk', 'every Turk' and 'all Turks' are the common words in the Constitution and other legal sources, including statutes, regulations, decrees, etc. (Kurban & Ensaroglu, 2010).

The Constitution enshrines Turkishness in its preamble and other sections. The preamble states that "no protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to Turkish national interests, Turkish existence and the principle of its indivisibility with its State and territory, historical and moral values of Turkishness". It also states that "[this constitution] has been entrusted by the TURKISH NATION to the democracy-loving Turkish sons' and daughters' love for the motherland and nation". Many such phrases as 'Turkish citizens' [*Türk vatandaşları*], 'Turkish Motherland' [*Türk Anavatanı*], 'Turkish existence' [*Türk varlığı*], 'Turkish Nation' [*Türk Milleti*], 'Turkish State' [*Türk Devleti*] and 'Turkish society' [*Türk toplumu*] are incorporated into a significant number of constitutional provisions (e.g. Articles 5, 7, 9, 41, 42, 59, 62, 66, 67, 76, 81, 101, 103, 104 and 174) as well as numerous other primary and secondary laws (Kurban & Ensaroglu, 2010).

The reforms have transformed the assimilationist Turkey into an integrationist republic, but they have not resulted in a political resolution to the Kurdish question. The last round of the armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the PKK has been continuing since July 2015.[3] It has cost at least 2,748 lives so far (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2017).[4] In addition, around 100,000 Kurds lost their homes, while up to 500,000 were temporarily displaced when the State imposed curfews in order to remove the barricades and trenches set up by PKK militants in the central areas of several Kurdish-populated towns and provinces (ICG, 2016, 2017).

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2 The Constitution is available at: https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf.

3 The PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire in April 2013 in response to several reforms made with the goal of resolving the Kurdish question by peaceful means. On 11 July 2015, the PKK announced the end of the two-year-long ceasefire on the grounds that Turkey used the ceasefire not for a democratic solution but for preparing for a new war and strengthening its hand in this future war by constructing dozens of military roads, posts and dams for the use of Turkish security forces. Following this announcement, the PKK waged a new terror campaign, leading to a new round of armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the PKK (Cicek and Coskun, 2016; Hamsici, 2015).

4 ICG is a prestigious independent organization aimed at preventing wars and shaping policies that would construct a more peaceful world. For more details, see its official website: www.crisisgroup.org.

Limits of Turkey's securitization approach

Turkey tries to resolve the Kurdish issue via security methods. The Republic is unlikely to solve its long-running political problem through such methods. In accordance with its securitization approach, Turkey tries to convince its citizens to accept the Kurdish question not as a political problem but as the PKK question threatening its national unity and territorial integrity. It acknowledges the eventual victory of its security forces against the PKK as the only way of resolving this question.

The Republic is unlikely to resolve its Kurdish issue via security methods. The main reason for this failure is the inaccurate definition of the issue under the securitization approach. It is true that the issue has an armed conflict dimension that might be called 'the PKK problem', but it also has political dimensions that can only be solved by democratic and peaceful means rather than the securitization approach.

If Turkey had defeated the PKK, would this dissolution mean the solution of the Kurdish problem? The answer is no. This dissolution might solve the armed conflict dimension of the problem, but its identity rights dimension would still be waiting for a political formula without which it is unlikely to be solved. Ethnic Kurds would not give up their multiculturalist demands for a new pluralist constitution, mother tongue education and a comprehensive decentralization policy (Coskun, 2016c). The identity rights dimension can only be resolved by political reforms recognizing, protecting and promoting Kurdish identity and its characteristics in both public and private realms. Having dissolved the PKK, Turkey would still need to resolve another dimension of the problem by satisfying multiculturalist Kurdish demands.

One may still argue that ethnic Kurds would give up their multiculturalist demands after the dissolution of the PKK. This is unlikely to happen. These demands are made by almost all segments of Kurdish society. According to a report prepared by the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (*Bilge Adamlar Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, BİLGESAM) in 2011, almost 90 percent of Kurds ask for the elimination of all discriminatory ethnic biases in the Constitution of Turkey and laws.[5] The report finds that 30.2 percent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity; 57.4 percent of Kurds want all ethnic groups, including the Kurds and Turks, mentioned; and the rest (12.4 percent) back the present legal discourse that incorporates only Turkish-based ethnic phrases into the Constitution and laws (Akyurek & Bilgic, 2011).

The findings of the 2011 BİLGESAM Report are confirmed by many subsequent reports. According to a report prepared by the Economic and Social Studies Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, TESEV) in 2012, 71.6 percent of Kurds want

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5 BİLGESAM is a well-known research center based in Istanbul. For more details, see its official website: http://www.bilgesam.org/en.

all ethnic groups, including the Kurds and Turks, mentioned in the Constitution and laws; 13.1 percent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity in the Constitution and laws; and the remainder (15.3 percent) support the *status quo* (TESEV, 2012).[6]

Whilst the 2011 BİLGESAM Report and the 2012 TESEV Report hear Kurdish opinions from all regions of Turkey, another report published by the Political and Social Studies Center (*Siyasal ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi*, SAMER) in 2012, pay attention to Kurdish perspectives only from the Kurdish-majority regions (Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia).[7] The 2012 SAMER Report finds the followings: 62 percent of Kurds want all ethnic groups mentioned in the Constitution and laws; 33 percent of Kurds want no reference to ethnicity in the Constitution and laws; and the rest (5 percent) want solely Turkish- and Kurdish-based ethnic phrases mentioned in the Constitution and laws (Gurer, 2012).

Similar results were also found by a report published by the International Cultural Research Center (*Uluslararası Kültürel Araştırmalar Merkezi*, UKAM) in 2013.[8] According to this report, most sectors of Kurdish society want Turkey to strip all discrimination from its Constitution and laws by either recognizing all ethnic groups or using a neutral legal language that does not give priority to any ethnic groups (UKAM, 2013). In a similar vein, a report published by the Justice Defenders Strategic Studies Center (*Adaleti Savunanlar Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, ASSAM) in 2015 states that most Kurdish tendencies want Turkey to remove discriminatory ethnic biases in its Constitution and laws (ASSAM, 2015).[9] The final report supporting all the above studies was published by the KONDA Research and Consultancy (*KONDA Araştırma ve Danışmanlık*, KONDA) in 2016.[10] This report finds that almost all Kurdish circles want Turkey to eliminate any sense of ethnicity-based discrimination in its Constitution and laws (KONDA, 2016).

A similar consensus has been reached on the official use of Kurdish. According to the 2011 BİLGESAM Report, four-fifths of Kurds support that Kurdish should be an official language in Turkey (Akyurek and Bilgic, 2011). Similarly, the 2012 TESEV Report finds that almost three-fourths of Kurds want Kurdish recognized as an official language

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6 TESEV is a prestigious think-tank based in Istanbul. For more details, see its official website: http://tesev.org.tr/en/.

7 SAMER is a research institute based in Diyarbakir. For more details, see its official website: http://www.ssamer.com/index.html.

8 UKAM is a research center based in Istanbul. For more details, see its official website: http://www.ukam.org/en.

9 ASSAM is a think-tank based in Istanbul. For more details, see its official website: http://www.assam.org.tr/en/.

10 KONDA is a leading research and consultancy company based in Istanbul. For more details, see its official website: http://konda.com.tr/en/home/.

(TESEV, 2012). The 2016 KONDA Report confirms that nearly three-fourths of Kurds ask for the official usage of their native language (KONDA, 2016).

Another consensus has been made on the matter of mother tongue education in Kurdish. According to the 2012 TESEV Report, 78 percent of Kurds dream of the adoption of a new education system that allows Kurdish to be used as the language of instruction from the kindergarten level to the end of higher education in both public and private schools and universities (TESEV, 2012). Similarly, this Kurdish aspiration is identified as one of the most widely-heard Kurdish demands by the 2013 UKAM Report and the 2015 ASSAM Report. Finally, the 2016 KONDA Report finds that 85 percent of Kurds would like to exercise the full right to mother tongue education in Kurdish (KONDA, 2016).

In the presence of a mass-based consensus upon the above Kurdish demands, it is unrealistic to expect that these demands would be renounced by the Kurds following the dissolution of the PKK. Anyone with a knowledge of the history of Turkey would dismiss this argument. Multiculturalist demands were voiced by the Kurds in the early years of the Republic (Olson, 1989; van Bruinessen, 1992). They rebelled against the coercive or repressive assimilation policies of the Republic eighteen times, including the Sheikh Said Riot of 1925, the Ararat Rebellion of 1927 and the Dersim Resistance of 1936 (Celik, 2010; Mumcu, 1992; Strohmeier, 2003). The Republic succeeded in quashing all these uprisings but failed to convince its Kurdish citizens to give up their identity rights and demands for political representation. These unsuccessful Kurdish insurgent movements did not lead the Kurds to renounce their multiculturalist demands. Even though they encountered numerous social, political and judicial problems, the Kurds continued to ask Turkey to satisfy the demands (Boyraz & Turan, 2016; van Bruinessen, 1993, 2000). The Republic's refusal to fulfill the demands resulted in a better organized and more powerful insurgent movement with the establishment of the outlawed PKK. In the absence of such a political formula, the Kurds not only continued to voice their demands but also formed a new insurgent organization using violent methods.

A similar scenario is likely to occur following the dissolution of the PKK. Having dissolved the PKK, Turkey might expect the Kurds to become integrated into its republican values without asking for the adoption of any multiculturalist policy. The Kurds are unlikely to meet this expectation. They would still call on the Republic to fulfill their identity rights and demands for political representation after the dissolution of the PKK. Turkey may still insist on refusing to offer a political resolution formula satisfying the demands. This refusal would stimulate a new Kurdish insurgent movement voicing more radical demands and using more violent methods than the PKK.

Turkey is unlikely to solve the identity rights dimension of the Kurdish question through the securitization approach. This approach may not solve the conflict either. Turkey had used various repressive security methods in order to end the violence in the 1980s and 1990s (Yegen, 1996, 1999, 2007; Zeydanlioglu, 2008, 2009). These methods have

not resulted in the dissolution of the PKK, but a PKK strengthening its support among ethnic Kurds (Gunes, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Marcus, 2007). It is likely that Turkey's current securitization approach will have similar consequences.

The last round of the armed conflict has been continuing since July 2015. It has cost at least 2,748 lives (ICG, 2017). Almost 500,000 Kurds were asked to temporarily evacuate their homes during months of security operations aimed at clearing out the PKK in several Kurdish-majority provinces and towns (ICG, 2016; Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı*, TİHV), 2016; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2017). The operations worsened education and social life in the East and Southeast (Amnesty International, 2016, 2017; OHCHR, 2017). They inflicted psychological and social damage to the Kurds (Human Rights Foundation [*İnsan Hakları Derneği*, İHD], 2017). They damaged cultural and historical heritage of several Kurdish-dominated provinces (Human Rights Joint Platform [*İnsan Hakları Ortak Platformu*, İHOP], 2018; ICG, 2017; İHD, 2017). It caused traumas that would be difficult to heal, particularly for Kurdish children (ICG, 2017; İHOP, 2018; TİHV, 2017).

All these problems may significantly damage the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks in the long run (Belge, 2016b, 2016c; Cemal, 2016a, 2016c; Coskun, 2016a, 2016b). They may dampen the Kurds' desire for coexistence (Belge, 2016a; Cemal, 2016b; Yanmis, 2016). Moreover, they may radicalize ethnic Kurds, especially Kurdish youth, who may begin to consider violent methods as the sole way of persuading Turkey to satisfy Kurdish demands, stimulating them to join the PKK (Akyol, 2016; Bayramoglu, 2015; Candar, 2016; Coskun, 2016d). This radicalization would produce a constant and dramatic increase in the number of PKK recruits, making the resolution of the armed conflict dimension of the Kurdish question very difficult (Cemal, 2016d, 2017; Cicek & Coskun, 2016; Sevinc, 2016; Todorova, 2015; Ustundag, 2015). Hence, the securitization approach might also prevent Turkey from ending the armed conflict.

It seems that ordinary citizens are aware of the inability of the securitization approach to solving the Kurdish problem. According to a survey-based report prepared by the Euroasia Public Opinion Research Center (*Avrasya Kamuoyu Araştırmaları Merkezi*) in 2016, a vast majority of Turkey's population (74.4 percent) are of the belief that the Kurdish issue can be resolved through political dialogues, but not through the securitization approach, while only 22.2 percent of the population regard security methods as enabling the Republic to solve the issue (Aslangul, 2016).

Conclusion

The Kurdish question is a long-running political problem of Turkey that has two main dimensions, an identity rights dimension and its armed conflict counterpart. The question has led to many democratic, humanitarian and economic costs. Turkey has made

several reforms in order to resolve its Kurdish problem since the last two decades. These reforms have transformed the assimilationist Turkey into an integrationist republic, but they have not resulted in a political resolution to the problem.

This article has sought to scrutinize whether Turkey can resolve its Kurdish issue via security methods. The article has eventually reached the conclusion that it would be very difficult to resolve the issue through Turkey's securitization approach. This approach defines the issue as the PKK problem while recognizing the ultimate victory of Turkish security forces against the PKK as the sole way of resolving the Kurdish question. The Kurdish question has an armed conflict dimension that might be called 'the PKK problem'. However, the question also has another dimension, the identity rights dimension, that would be resolved only by multiculturalist political settlements enabling Kurdish identity and its characteristics (e.g. language, culture, history, traditions, etc.) to be recognized, preserved and promoted in both public and private areas.

It is unlikely for the securitization approach to resolve even the armed conflict dimension of the Kurdish issue. The approach puts individual Kurds in an awkward position in the Kurdish-majority provinces, where they face many economic, educational and social problems. All these problems would damage the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks, and accordingly dampen the Kurds' desire for coexistence. This would engender a radicalized Kurdish movement using violent methods to persuade Turkey to adopt a political settlement satisfying Kurdish demands. This would provide the PKK with a chance to increase its recruits, making the resolution of the armed conflict dimension of the Kurdish issue difficult.

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