

COMMENTARY

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The Kurds' Treatment in Turkey is Indefensible

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The below article is a response to a public letter written by Ibrahim Kurtulus, criticizing my previous article about the plight of the Kurds in Turkey. Kurtulus is a member of the Federation of Turkish American Associations, Inc.

Given the plight of the Kurds in Turkey and the need to find a solution to the 40-year-old violent conflict between the PKK and successive Turkish governments, I thought it was critically important to respond to Kurtulus' criticism of my previous article and bring to light the terrible mistreatment of the Kurds under Erdogan's reign of terror. Kurtulus resorts to sweeping absurdities and dishonesty to rebut my position, but to no avail. His blind biases and hypocrisy shine throughout his counter-arguments, which are on display for all to see. Meanwhile, the Kurds continue to suffer, and it is they who are paying the price.

To put things in perspective, it is important to identify who Kurtulus is and highlight his suspect behaviour, which raises serious questions about his credibility and integrity.

This is a man who openly colluded with Michael Flynn, the disgraced former National Security Advisor for President Donald Trump. Flynn, a paid lackey of the Turkish government, "omitted Kurtulus...in [a] section of the form requiring more specific disclosures for income sources in the last year," according to the Washington Post. Kurtulus' funding of Flynn as a quasi-spokesman on behalf of Turkish interests makes him complicit in the actions of a man who exhibited deceitful behaviour while in high office.

Kurtulus qualifies himself as "having nothing to do with the Turkish government," but a cursory glance at his public record reveals his connections to Erdogan loyalists and even members of

Erdogan's own family. There are numerous instances of Kurtulus appearing at public functions alongside Hilal Mutlu, an activist and cousin of the Turkish president, and Kurtulus leveraged his relationships with Mutlu to convince General Flynn that Fethullah Gülen was the primary plotter of the failed 15 July 2016 coup.

His first claim that I am either a “friend of the Kurds, or a hater of the Turks, or both” is irrational. In which way does my sympathy for the Kurdish cause mean that I am a hater of the Turkish people? Similarly, my respect for the Turkish people does not translate to hatred of the Kurds. In my article, I equally blame both the PKK and Erdogan for the on-going cycle of violence that is devastating south-eastern Turkey, and killing scores of innocent Kurds and Turks alike—hardly an endorsement of one side versus the other.

Acknowledging the reality of the deadly cycle of violence does not make me a propagandist on behalf of the Kurds, as Kurtulus claims. No one in today's Turkey can voice any dissent against Erdogan and do so with impunity. But no one is deserving of more piercing criticism than Erdogan for inflicting so much pain and agony on millions of innocent Turkish citizens, while assuming dictatorial powers and dismantling the foundation of Turkey's democracy.

The Turkey-PKK conflict has been long and bloody, and one cannot attribute the killing solely to the PKK, as many thousands have been killed on both sides. The focus needs to be on preventing further bloodshed, and this can only be achieved if both commit to the resumption of well-intentioned peace negotiations. The PKK is indeed recognized as a terror group by many countries, but how does Kurtulus reconcile that with the fact that Erdogan himself negotiated with this “terror group”?

Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurds, has indicated time and again that he is ready and willing to resume negotiations, and it is Erdogan who is refusing to restart the peace talks which he abruptly ended in 2015. In fact, his own Prime Minister at the time, Ahmet Davutoglu, beseeched him not to do so for the sake of the country and its future stability. When will Erdogan and people like Kurtulus understand that the Kurdish problem in Turkey cannot be simply wished away? Erdogan will fail, like his predecessors, to fight the PKK “until the very last rebel is killed.”

The Turkish Kurds have every right to live their lives as they see fit and still be loyal citizens of their country. What gives Kurtulus or Erdogan the right to dictate the way the Kurds should live, and deprive them of their cultural heritage? In which way would that infringe on Turkey, especially when hypocrites like Kurtulus claim that Turkey is a democracy?

Let me be abundantly clear, and I quote directly from my article: “I do not support, and I condemn any individual or group who uses brutal force for political or social gains regardless of its source,

motivation, ideology, or belief.” Thus, I am not turning Öcalan into “some sort of a hero,” as Kurtulus suggests. Nevertheless, Öcalan remains the leader of the Kurdish cause in Turkey and is the best conduit for achieving a peaceful settlement, especially given his past and present willingness to engage in serious negotiations to end this endemic conflict.

To be sure, the designation of the PKK as a terror group is arbitrary—Mandela’s ANC was listed as a terrorist group until 2008, and Mandela himself languished in jail for 26 years. Who today views Mandela as a terrorist? Again, I refer to my above comments regarding the very notion of what a terror group is in this context—Erdogan’s engagement with the PKK would make him a terrorist sympathizer, according to Kurtulus’ “logic.”

Kurtulus says that my comments on the discrimination faced by the Kurds leave me a “step away from claiming the Kurds are wearing yellow stars” [emphasis added]. I condemn in the strongest terms Kurtulus’ knee-jerk evocation of Nazi-era practices, which demonstrates how ignorant and blind he is to historic events, especially of that era.

There is a long history of discrimination against Kurds in Turkey that persists today and would simply take too long to enumerate here. The Kurdish language was suppressed for decades, Kurdish-run schools were not allowed to operate, there was forced relocation—Kurtulus’ flippant treatment of this well-documented history is astonishing.

Kurtulus calls into question the loyalty of 14,000 Kurdish teachers who were recently removed from their posts due to unfounded claims of terroristic association. We are talking about innocent civilian teachers—while Kurtulus is making the extraordinary claim that all of them are PKK terrorists or have related affiliations, he does not produce a shred of evidence about the teachers’ culpability. Instead, he turns a blind eye to the consistent abuse of and discrimination against the Kurds, and worships Erdogan for jailing thousands of breadwinners and leaving their families in utter despair.

Democratically elected Kurdish MPs have been marginalized and their party was all but ejected from the parliament. It is clear why Erdogan targeted them—the growing electoral strength of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) was an obstacle in his quest for dictatorial powers. As Erdogan himself shamelessly said, the failed coup was a “gift from God,” which he seized to realize his sinister dream of purging anyone that stands in his way—with a special focus on the Kurds and the followers of his arch enemy Fethullah Gülen.

Kurtulus suggests that I was advocating for Kurdish independence, which I have not. I have spoken to scores of Kurdish parliamentarians over the years; none has ever implied they seek independence, and certainly they are not demanding the surrender of any part of Turkish territory.

Here again, Kurtulus chooses to level charges that have no semblance to reality. In which way would the Kurdish demand to have some freedom to run their own domestic affairs translate to surrendering land? Only people who wish to distort reality will read into what the Kurds aspire for as tantamount to political independence.

Let me repeat—the Kurds' loyalty to Turkey and their desire to have the freedom to enjoy their culture and language is not an oxymoron. In fact, they complement each other, as in any genuine democratic country cultural diversity enriches rather than undermines social cohesiveness. The US provides an exemplary case attesting to this fact.

Like all his misstatements of fact, Kurtulus equates the PKK to ISIS, which is as absurd as the rest of his argument. The whole world, including myself, has condemned ISIS in every which way, as they have usurped lands from sovereign states and employed brutal force in the areas where they governed. In which way do Turkish Kurds resemble ISIS? Kurtulus' sweeping analogies are consistent with his sweeping denials as he seems to revel in illusions, where fools find comfort.

In another section of his invective letter, Kurtulus deviates into an absurd non-sequitur that merits a response only because of the sheer absurdity and falsehoods he joyfully spat out. I have never said that the "Turks do not belong in the human race" and would never make such a degenerate and depraved statement when in fact I have tremendous admiration for the Turkish people. Kurtulus simply reaffirmed his alphabetism of my work and his addiction to lies and misstatements.

His foray into denial of the Armenian Genocide speaks volumes to the shaky intellectual ground on which he stands. At no point in my article did I address the Armenian Genocide and I will not engage in a historical debate on this dark chapter in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. All I can say is that today's new Republic of Turkey and the Turkish people cannot and should not be blamed for the sins of their forefathers, just as no one in his right mind should blame today's Germany and its people for the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany three generations ago.

Kurtulus cannot claim that "Turkey is still a democracy" and expect to be taken seriously. I can point to the firing of thousands of civil servants without a shred of evidence of involvement in the failed coup; to the dozens of journalists in jail only for doing their jobs; to the sham referendum that was held during a state of emergency; to the lifting of parliamentary immunity in order to target Kurdish members of the Assembly; to the laws criminalizing offensive speech against Erdogan; to the evisceration of the Turkish judiciary system in order to install his cronies; to the witch hunt of anyone suspected of having any affiliation with the Gülen movement; and so on. The list is by no means exhaustive, but it illustrates the sad state of Turkey's reality today—one that has become completely subsumed to Erdogan's cult of personality.

I stand by my position that the Turkish Kurds have the right to enjoy freedom and security as loyal citizens. It is time that all Turkish citizens recognize this reality, and demand the resumption of peace talks to end the continuing death and destruction, which is tearing the social fabric of their country while depriving 15 million Kurds of their basic human rights.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/kurds-treatment-turkey-indefensible/>

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