

Detailed Analysis of Turkey's Language Policy

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Abstract: This paper examines the language policy of the Turkey, and its assimilationist policy towards Kurds and Kurdish language. Language diversity has emerged as a major source of conflict which is affecting the peace as well stability of many political entities all over the world. Language policy makers usually face the questions of accommodating the needs of linguistically diverse communities. It studies how the Turkish nationalist elites, the Kemalists throughout the 20th century systematically as well intentionally suppressed the language of the Kurds as part of their aim to construct a homogenous nation- state of Turkish speakers. It shows that this linguistic policy was strongly informed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the consequent Kemalists emphasis on complete ethno-linguistic homogeneity as criteria for being Turkish, Western and civilized. The article discusses the various Turkification strategies of the authorities, such as banning the Kurdish language, the denial of the existence of the Kurds, changing the names of towns and villages, the forced re-settlement of Kurds and the assimilation of Kurdish children. It also focuses the recent developments in Turkey's Kurdish language policy and the reform efforts put by the recent governments as part of the country's European Union membership. The article reflects that whilst looking good on paper but these reforms have had little or totally negligent impact in reality and Kurdish speakers in Turkey are still denied their basic human and linguistic rights.

Keywords: Kurdish, Turkish, Linguicidal Policy, Turkey, Ethno-Linguistic.

Historical overview:

Turkish people or the Turks also known as Anatolian Turks are a Turkic ethnic group and nation living mainly in Turkey and speaking Turkish, the most widely-spoken Turkic language. They are the largest ethnic group in Turkey, as well as the largest ethnic group among the speakers of Turkic languages. Ethnic Turkish minorities and Creole peoples exist in the former lands of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish language also known as Istanbul Turkish is a southern Oghuz branch of the Turkic languages. It is natively spoken by the Turkish people in Turkey, Balkans, the island of Cyprus, Meskhetia, and other areas of traditional settlement that formerly, in whole or part, belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Turkish is the official language of Turkey.

Era of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk:

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk led the Turkish War of Independence against the Allied forces that occupied the former Ottoman Empire. He united the Turkish Muslim majority and successfully led them from 1919 to 1922 in overthrowing the occupying forces out of the Turkish National homeland. The Turkish identity became the unifying force in 1923. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed and the newly founded Republic of Turkey was formally established. The treaty created the modern states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel out of the Ottoman Empire, but Kurdistan was ignored. During Turkey's war for independence Turkish leaders promised Kurds a Turkish-Kurdish federated state in return for their assistance in the war. After independence was achieved they ignored the bargain they had made. Ataturk's presidency was marked by a series of radical political and social reforms that transformed Turkey into a secular, modern republic with civil and political equality for sectarian minorities and women. A 1924 mandate forbade Kurdish schools, organizations and publications. Even the words "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" were outlawed, making any written or spoken acknowledgement of their existence illegal. It is illegal for parents to give children Kurdish names; they must choose Turkish names or face punishment.

Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, Turks and other Muslims, from the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Aegean islands, the island of Cyprus, the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay), the Middle East, and the Soviet Union continued to arrive in Turkey. Most of them settled in urban north-western Anatolia. The bulk of immigrants, known as Muhacirs, were the Balkan Turks who faced harassment and discrimination in their homelands. There were still remnants of a Turkish population in many of these countries because the Turkish government wanted to preserve these communities so that the Turkish character of these neighboring territories could be maintained.

The modern Turks cannot read anything written before the First World War without help and problems of two types-first is the vocabulary of the language and second is the script in which language is written. Pre-Ataturk Turkish known as Osmanlica language is written in Arabic script which creates troubles for the contemporary Turkish readers. Arabic is a Semitic language as is Hebrew but Turkish is not a Semitic language. It belongs to a family known as Altaic.⁴ One important change to Turkish literature was enacted in 1928, when Mustafa Kemal started the creation and dissemination of a modified version of the Latin alphabet to replace the Arabic alphabet based Turkish script. This together with changes in Turkey's system of education would lead to more widespread literacy in the country. Modern standard Turkish is based on the dialect of Istanbul. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was best known in linguistic quarters as the man who in 1927 stated that Turkish would be written in Roman letters rather than in the Arabic script of the Ottoman Empire. He never allowed anything in his way for unification of the Turkey and cutting links from Arab and Arabic and from Turks outside the boundary of turkey. The new Roman letters were first taught in November 1928, Arabic writing was totally abolished in 1929 and Persian also dropped from the school curriculum in September 1929.

Ataturk created a singular secular system of education designed to produce a skilled working class. He turned away Turkey from the Arab countries and began facing towards the west.

Turkification in Education: started Turkification and ended Kurdification

There are three major Anatolian Turkish dialect groups spoken in Turkey: the West Anatolian dialect (to the west of the Euphrates), the East Anatolian dialect (to the east of the Euphrates), and the North East Anatolian group, comprising the dialects of the Eastern Black Sea coast. The Balkan Turkish dialects are considerably closer to standard Turkish and do not differ from it. In the post-Ottoman period, Cypriot Turkish was relatively isolated from standard Turkish and had strong influences by the Cypriot Greek dialect. The condition of coexistence with the Greek Cypriots led to a certain bilingualism whereby Turkish Cypriots knowledge of Greek was important in areas where the two communities lived and worked together. The linguistic situation changed radically in 1974, when the island was divided into a Greek south and a Turkish north (Northern Cyprus). Today, the Cypriot Turkish dialect is being exposed to increasing standard Turkish through immigration from Turkey, new mass media, and new educational institutions.

While Kurdish persecution became more selective during World War II, largely restricted to Kurdish intellectuals, the overall policy in Turkey has remained consistent. This stranglehold is reflected in Kurdish literature. In twentieth century only about a dozen works have been produced in Kurdish. The authors have usually received prison sentences. In 1930 the Turkish Minister of Justice declared: *I won't hide my feelings. The Turk is the only lord, the only master of Turkey and those not of pure Turkish origin will have only one right in Turkey, the right to be servants and slaves.* Turkey is not content to persecute Kurds within its borders. In 1980 the Turkish Embassy in Denmark ordered the Union of Workers from Turkey to discontinue a Kurdish language course organized by the Copenhagen Evening School. The course was aimed at incorporating Kurdish in the home language teaching program in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish and West-German schools.

The policy of Republican Turkey since its establishment in 1923 is a typical case called "linguicide" or "linguistic genocide". Replacing the loosely integrated Ottoman state, Republican Turkey was established as a highly centralized, secular and westernized nation-state based on Turkish ethnic identity. The practice of centralization and Turkification led to a number of Kurdish revolts.

Policy on the Kurdish language was based on a more general and long-term aim of changing the ethnic composition of the Kurds, who formed the most numerous and densely populated non-Turkish people in the country. To achieve this objective, the Turkish government deployed hundreds of thousands of people from Kurdistan to Turkish-inhabited regions of the country. Conducted mass executions after each revolt, resettled Turkish immigrants from Europe in the Kurdish areas in the 1920s-1940s. By the late 1930s, all the Kurdish provinces were effectively controlled by the military who established a police post in every village of some size. Forcing the Kurds to leave their language and become native speakers of Turkish is the primary goal of the language policy. Various methods have been used in the past seven decades to eliminate the Kurdish language.

The ban on spoken Kurdish language in public places, government offices and schools was easy to enforce. In the earlier decades, special government officials were charged with enforcing the ban in urban centers. Even the peasants who brought their supplies to the urban market were liable to a fine of five piaster for every Kurdish word they uttered. A sheep was worth fifty piaster at the time.

Physical violence and separation from one's own family were some of the other methods used in Turkish schools to prevent the student from speaking Kurdish. Students were also punished for speaking their language outside the classrooms during the breaks. Boarding schools were established in 1964, in order to isolate students for the greater part of the year and to encourage them to forget their mother tongue.

"Symbolic violence" e.g., making native speakers ashamed of their language, parents, and origins, has been most intensively carried out against the Kurds. The names "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" were banned and replaced by *Dagli Türkler*, 'mountain Kurd' and *Dogu*, 'the East'. The existence of a Kurdish nation was denied in innumerable articles, books, and speeches while the Turks were exalted, under the new version of Turkish history, as the most valiant and noble race on earth. Under the "Sun-Language Theory" adopted in 1935, it was claimed that Central Asia, the ancient homeland of the Turks, was the cradle of human civilization and Turkish was the mother of all languages. Kurds were considered a tribe of Turanian (Turkish) origin which had forgotten its native tongue due to isolation in inaccessible mountains and by falling under the influence of its Persian neighbors.

The denial of the existence of a Kurdish nation was carried out through falsification of both the history and language of the Kurds. The prescription of the spoken language included also government efforts to dissuade the Kurds from listening to foreign broadcasts in Kurdish. Numerous radio stations were set up in Kurdish towns, which together with the powerful central transmitters provided round-the-clock programs in Turkish.

The suppression of written Kurdish has been more successful than spoken Kurdish since it is much easier to control the possession of print or manuscript material by individuals and groups or their circulation in libraries. Not only writing in Kurdish but the writing of the name Kurd and Kurdistan in any language is proscribed.

During "liberalization periods" (1967-71, 1975-80), a new generation of intellectuals and political activists undertook the publishing of bilingual periodicals, two Kurdish-Turkish dictionaries, one grammar and even a self-censored edition of Khani's *Mem û Zîn* (work of Mam u Zin of Ahmed-i-Khani). Most of these publications were banned soon after their appearance and their writers or publishers were prosecuted on charges of separatism.

The all-round attempt to eliminate the Kurdish people and their language has partly succeeded in thinning out the once densely populated Kurdistan, in Turkifying large numbers of Kurds, and bringing Kurdish national culture i.e., oral and written literature, music, and dress to the verge of extinction. The harsh methods of repression have made it difficult for the Kurds to reveal their ethnic identity.

The impact of repression can be seen even in the census figures. The increase of 10% in the number of native speakers from 1955 to 1960 can be explained by the relaxation of pressure in 1960¹⁵. Increase in the number of speakers of Kurdish as a "second language" apparently reflects the success of Turkification. Since Turks do not learn Kurdish, these figures probably refer to Turkified Kurds who have not yet forgotten their native tongue. In Turkey, the Armenian people and their language were eliminated largely through physical extinction planned by the Ottoman and Republican regimes. Same methods have been applied to the Kurdish population and, if regional and international conditions permit, the Armenian experience may be repeated. On 11th September 1979 general Kenan Evren ordered for report from General Haydar Saltik on whether or not the coup was in order or if the government needed a stern warning and the report recommended for a coup which was delivered in six months. On 21 December the war academy generals convened to decide the course of action and the pretext for the coup was to put an end to the social conflicts of the 1970 as well as the parliamentary instability. The coup was planned to take place on 11th July 1980 but it was postponed after a motion to put Demirel's government to a vote of confidence was rejected on 2nd July. On 12th September the National Security Council headed by Evren declared coup on the national channel. It banned all political parties and trade unions abolished the parliament and the government, suspended the constitution. They invoked the Kemalist tradition of state secularism and the unity of the nation, justify the coup and presented themselves as opposed to communism, fascism, separatism and religious sectarianism. One of the most visible effects of coup was on economy. The economic changes in between 1980-1983 were credited to Turgut Ozal the main person responsible for the economic policy by the Demirel administration since 24 January 1980. In 1983 elections, governance of one party came under Turgut Ozal's motherland party which combined a neoliberal economic program with conservative social values. President Turgut Ozal's policy on lifting the ban on spoken Kurdish in January 1991 did not indicate a change in the ideology and politics of the Turkish state.¹⁷ The policy is tactical and is part of the serious efforts to save the Atatürkist state in the face of a serious economic, political, cultural and ideological crisis.

On January 27, 1991, the cabinet of President Turgut Ozal decided to submit a bill to the parliament which would allow "the Kurds, concentrated in 13 provinces, to speak-but not write their language." The bill would repeal the 1985 Law No. 2987, which had banned the use of written and spoken Kurdish. In the parliament, the bill ran into stiff opposition. By August 1991, it was still illegal for Kurds "to speak Kurdish in court or at public meetings or to give their children Kurdish names". A new "Anti-Terror Law" enacted by the parliament on April 12, 1991 further extended the official repression of Kurdish language and culture.

The national vote on 12 June 2011 confirmed the AKP's undisputed electoral hegemony in Turkish politics, and accelerated the decline of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) as an autonomous political body. The commanding generals, at the heart of the Turkish republic's governance since the foundation of the state lost their formerly pivotal role.

After the election of June 2011, the government ceased the army by imposing new restrictions that prevented the promotion of generals hostile to the government. The resignation on 29 July of the chief-of-staff and the commanders of the land, air, and sea forces in protest at the continuing detention of high-ranking soldiers as part of the ongoing criminal investigations was a further striking symbol of the weakness of the TAF leadership *vis-à-vis* the AKP. The AKP's success in establishing authority over the military and senior judiciary contrasts with its approach to the Kurdish nationalist movement, whose conflict with AKP policies now represents the greatest challenge to democratic stability in Turkey. In essence, the movement demands the teaching of Kurdish in the national education system, and a form of territorial autonomy that will recognize the Kurds' right of self-determination within Turkey's national boundaries.

The education system is centrally managed in accordance with laws set down by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the founding of the republic in 1923. Atatürk created a singular secular system of education designed to produce a skilled working class. According to the constitution of the Republic of Turkey every citizen has the right to education which is free of charge for the compulsory primary education. Except in specially licensed and foreign institutions, Turkish must be taught as mother tongue. The private institutions of higher education were banned in early 1970's and were permitted to operate again in Turkey in the 1981-82 academic years but only on a non-profit basis. The curriculum of these institutions must be approved by council higher education. Prior to 1997 education reforms, compulsory education was five years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education. In 1997 years increased from five to nine years and in 2012 under the government's new laws the 12 years of compulsory education have been divided into three four levels i.e., (4+4+4): primary, middle and high school. In most of the primary schools, foreign language lessons start from fourth class. In the universities the instruction is generally in Turkish.

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