

Gunter, Michael M. The Kurds and the Future of Turkey. New York: St. Martin's, 1997.

Christian M. Breil

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Often pushed off the front page of the American newspapers by crises with Iraq and the conflict in Israel, the low-profile war between Turkey and its Kurd population continues to be one of central importance to stability in the region. As recently as Fall 1998 Turkey threatened its neighbor Syria and invaded Iraq yet again in the attempt to bring the war to a close. In February 1999, Turkey triumphantly apprehended Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, or PKK. Despite Turkey's extraordinary efforts, the war goes on.

Michael M. Gunter has studied the Kurd's struggle since his introduction to the topic as Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Ankara in 1978. Since then, he has written a number of articles on the subject and his recent book, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*, is an update of his 1990 work, *The Kurds in Turkey*. Gunter's new book is brief, under 200 pages in length and provides the necessary background information on the actors in the conflict, particularly the PKK. Gunter examines the guerrilla wing and urban militia of the PKK as he traces the history of the PKK's founder, Abdullah Ocalan. Gunter also explores the way in which the PKK finances its activities. Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is devoted to foreign influences on the conflict. These include the PKK's organizations in Europe, the relationship between Turkey and its neighbors as well as American and Russian involvement in the struggle. (The US government has aided Turkey in portraying the PKK as terrorists to the rest of the world while the Russian government has harbored Ocalan).

The thesis of Gunter's work is that Turkey is burdened by its authoritarian tradition. The authoritarian tradition is based on the belief that all Muslims are brothers. The Turkish government extends this belief to mean that all people living within its borders are brothers, and therefore there can be no minorities, only Turks. Gunter believes that if the Turks abandon their authoritarian tradition, no longer fight the PKK and allow the Kurdish population to remain culturally different, the guerrillas will voluntarily end the fighting and no longer desire an independent Kurdistan.

That the conflict can best be ended by Turkey giving up the fight is optimistic but perhaps unlikely. Turkey is, after all, winning. The Turkish government has been effective at reducing the number of PKK guerrillas in the southeast. Its successful strategy has been to saturate the southeast with government troops, making the countryside inhospitable to guerrillas and hunting them down in their mountain hideouts and sanctuaries.

The government's control of the region's cities and villages has broken the all-important link between the guerrillas and the people they claim to be fighting for. Turkey has committed over 250,000 troops to the southeast. It has also implemented a system of Village Guards that brings the total number of government forces up over 300,000. With those numbers the government can control most of the villages in the region (they have destroyed over 3,000 others). Unable to use the villagers to gather supplies and

intelligence, the PKK is forced into the mountains and sanctuary in Northern Iraq and Syria. Turkey subsequently made strong efforts to eliminate the PKK's sanctuaries.

Gunter himself concludes that Operation Provide Comfort, or OPC, the UN's attempt to create a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq, has not benefitted the Turkish Kurds. The UN observation posts in northern Iraq are often operated by Turkish soldiers who are more than happy to report both on Iraqi army activities and the activities of the Kurds. With this intelligence, the Turkish army can make regular invasions into Northern Iraq to destroy the PKK's training camps. Turkey also maintains allies in Northern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds depend on the Turkish army to protect them from Saddam Hussein and, in exchange, help in the fight against the PKK. The result is that the PKK has lost the ability to operate openly in Iraq.

By eliminating the sanctuary in Northern Iraq, the Turkish army has forced the PKK to hide in Syria. Syria has long been a supporter of the PKK and until recently has allowed the PKK to maintain safe-houses inside its borders. In response, Turkey closed the Syrian border and built a fence-line that stretches almost all the way from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey also put pressure on the Syrian government to expel the PKK by threatening to cut off the flow of the Euphrates River into Syria. More recently, Turkey pressured the Syrian government through the outright threat of military action. Syria has responded by expelling the PKK leadership and reportedly closing down the PKK's training camps. Turkey has therefore eliminated both the PKK's sanctuaries in Iraq and Syria.

The only task at which Turkey has not succeeded, it seems, is in eliminating the random terrorist activities that are linked to the PKK's urban militia. By clearing the villages of the southeast, Turkey has forced many Kurds into the slums of the region's cities, such as Diyarbakir. Understandably, in the slums there is a great anti-government sentiment that breeds terrorists. These terrorists will continue the conflict and carry it from the southeast into the big cities.

Gunter's desire to end the struggle with as little bloodshed as possible is intriguing if not noble. Yet as humane and sensible as Gunter's solution seems, it is hard to imagine how it will become reality. When one calculates how many resources Turkey has committed to the conflict, a different and more cynical conclusion tempts: the Turkish government has no reason to change its strategy so long as it perceives the end in sight. That end seems near now that Ocalan, the untouchable figurehead of the PKK, is in Turkish custody.

The importance of the war to the region's stability and Gunter's clear writing style make *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* a valuable resource. It is an excellent addition to one's library either as an introductory text, or better, as a compliment to the texts on the conflict one already possesses.

Christian M. Breil
University of Delaware