



The Next Iran or the Next Brazil?: Right-Wing Groups behind Political Violence in Turkey

Author(s): Seyla Benhabib

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *MERIP Reports*, No. 77 (May, 1979), pp. 16-17

Published by: [Middle East Research and Information Project](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3010992>

Accessed: 30/11/2011 17:29

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Middle East Research and Information Project is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MERIP Reports*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Next Iran or the Next Brazil?

Right-wing Groups Behind Political Violence in Turkey

by Seyla Benhabib

Coming in the wake of turmoil in neighboring Iran, the bloody events in the province of Kahramanmaras in southeastern Turkey have been presented to the American public as yet another instance of religious warfare in the Middle East. Under the title "Another Holy War Erupts in Turkey," a *New York Times* editorial (Dec. 31, 1978) asserted that Islamic politics, "obscured by modern political and economic rhetoric," had erupted in violence "rooted in ancient religious enmity" between Sunni Muslims and Alevis, a branch of the Shi'i Muslim sect. But the *Times* dangerously misleads us to present the events in Kahramanmaras as one more instance of a perennial "holy war." Behind the front of a holy war lies an all too secular and destructive strategy mounted by the organized, extreme right in Turkey.

The events of Kahramanmaras were preceded by political violence and mounting tension in neighboring provinces. The death toll in 1978 for the province of Kars to the northeast was 24; for Elazig to the east and Gaziantep to the south it was 60; for Diyarbakir it was 27; and for Sivas to the northwest it was 50. In April a similarly bloody confrontation occurred in Malatya when right-wing groups gathered at the funeral of a deputy of their National Movement Party attacked the headquarters of the local social democratic and left wing organizations, leaving 9 dead and 50 wounded. In 1978 there were 918 political assassinations in Turkey, compared with 37 in Italy and 97 in Spain.

For the last eighteen months the eastern provinces have been the targets of right-wing strategies, while militant left-wing organizations have often responded in kind to the terrorism, violence and murder perpetrated by the right. Historically the most impoverished area of the country, eastern Anatolia has a diverse religious and ethnic population. The largest minority ethnic group in the area is the Kurds, many of whom are Alevis. Ethnic Turks make up the majority of the population, and most of them are Sunni. Religious and ethnic differences correspond significantly to class divisions. The Turkish Sunni population comprise the small producers, landlords, middlemen, and civil servants; the Alevi Kurds are for the most part wage laborers, share croppers, or migrant agricultural workers.*

Traditional class differences are undergoing rapid transformation in this area. As the economic market expands from the big cities like Istanbul, Izmir and Adana to this hinterland, some of the traditionally privileged class of small producers, landowners, and middlemen are transformed into the local representatives and distributors of large commercial and industrial firms. Others are finding themselves pushed into the proletariat in the wake of expanding commercial and industrial competition. Extreme right-wing groups have succeeded in channeling the economic and political disaffection of the Sunni population against the Alevis. This sector of the population has also been the target in recent years of various advocates of "armed liberation strategies," ranging from vanguard people's war to a separatist Kurdish national movement.

The extreme right-wing groups have exploited Sunni resentment and national chauvinist sentiments to create civil war conditions in the region. The Turkish and European press has documented that in Kahramanmaras right-wing mobsters, in some instances led by local heads of right-wing commando units known as Idealist Youth Organizations (UGD), attacked the crowd gathered at the funeral of two young leftist teachers who had been gunned down the night before by "unknown" assailants. When the rightists attempted to prevent the crowd from proceeding to the mosque and were not stopped by local security forces, they then marched into specific Alevi districts of Kahramanmaras, where they murdered, looted, torched and plundered for two days before the army and security forces could restore order.

This was no simple eruption of "ancient religious hostility," but a highly organized political confrontation. The right-wing groups were heavily armed, in some cases with American-made M-1 guns, also used by the Turkish army. The shops and residences of known rightist sympathisers were not harmed. Organized groups poured into Kahramanmaras from neighboring cities and towns in bus convoys.

The Idealist Youth Organization was first established nationally under the right-of-center government of Suleyman Demirel in the 1973-74 period, with the explicit purpose of confronting and containing growing left-wing militancy. Known colloquially as *Bozkurt*, after the legendary grey wolf who led the original Turkish people of central

*About two-thirds of Turkey's nearly two million Kurds are Sunni, and there are Alevi Turks. The Kahramanmaras area is unique for its concentration of Alevi Kurds.



Prime Minister Ecevit with bodyguard during election campaign.

Asia, it is unofficially sponsored by the National Movement Party. This avowedly “national socialist” party is headed by Alpaslan Türkeş, who fondly refers to the Idealist Youth as “the true children of the motherland.”*

In the 1977 national elections, Türkeş’ party won a million votes and 16 seats in the 450-member parliament. Using its position as a junior partner in right-wing coalition cabinets both before and after the elections, NMP leaders shrewdly and methodically placed adherents in key posts throughout the civil service and armed forces. Since all civil servants have tenure, removing them from sensitive roles in the judiciary, police, customs and other departments is difficult if not impossible.

Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the social-democratic National People’s Republican Party did his best to clean house when he assumed power in January 1978. His first target was the upper ranks of the military. But when asked recently if the army and police were loyal to the government he replied candidly that the army now is, but the police are “infiltrated by political factions and divided.”

Former military prosecutor and Supreme Court Justice Emin Deger has detailed collaboration between the *Bozkurts* and government counter-guerrilla units, and the close ties of the latter with the Central Intelligence Agency of the US. He cites the advice from the CIA handbook used by the Turkish armed forces: anti-subversion units must be prepared “to lead actions which can arouse popular suspicions that they are the work of revolutionaries. To achieve this one should not even refrain from engaging in acts of humanity.”

*Various right-wing commando groups were organized nationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s and entrenched themselves during the coalition governments headed by the right-wing Justice Party. This party promotes the growth of a capitalist Turkey under the hegemony of the Western industrialized countries. The National Salvation Party advocates an Islamic Turkey integrated into the larger Islamic world. Each party maintains its own units of “militants,” but the others have been eclipsed by the violence and ruthlessness of the *Bozkurts*.

This strategy may be all too easy to implement at this point in Turkish history. Alienated from the working class, impatient for revolution, eager to retaliate against right-wing terror, middle-class students and intellectuals have spread themselves among 20 leftist factions. They offer a ready target for infiltration by provocateurs and a cover for rightist attacks on one another.

The events of May 1, 1977 illustrate this vulnerability all too well. Half a million persons gathered in Istanbul’s Taksim Square for the largest May Day rally outside of the Communist countries. It signified the resurgence of the Turkish left following the martial law repression of the early 1970s, and specifically of the Turkish Communist Party, now based in the German Democratic Republic. The CP dominates some professional organizations, like the architects’ and artists’ unions, and may have an electoral base of a million votes. The May Day rally was organized by CP sympathisers and officially excluded Maoist groups. When Maoists attempted to join the demonstration from a side street, shots rang out. As shooting continued many demonstrators were trampled in the ensuing panic and terror. The final casualty list was 37 dead and more than 90 wounded. Contrary to initial press reports blaming the shooting on the Maoists, investigations disclosed that snipers had opened fire from the roofs of surrounding buildings, including the Justice and National Salvation Parties’ headquarters.

Political violence is only one of Turkey’s problems. The national economy is nearly bankrupt, with much of the foreign debt of more than \$14 billion owed to private US and European banks. Long rows of shantytowns encircle the major cities. Housing migrants come from the countryside and half a million workers who have been sent home by West German firms cutting back on foreign labor. Unemployment is nearly 20 percent. Commercial and industrial entrepreneurs bemoan the near-paralysis in trade and production. Workers, civil servants, and others complain that rapid inflation, inequitable taxes, and the new wage controls are devouring their real income.

The severity of the economic crisis and the inability of the regime to cope with internal violence and external pressures has generated support among some sectors of the population for an authoritarian solution. The long-term strategy of the right goes beyond discrediting Ecevit’s government to fomenting of civil war conditions. At a time when events in neighboring Iran have focused attention on the “northern tier” of the Middle East, a right-wing junta in Turkey that promises stability may seem attractive to Western strategists and policy-makers. At their recent Guadeloupe summit, the leaders of West Germany, France, Britain and the US spent much of their time discussing ways to bolster this weakest link in the NATO alliance. Aside from an economic bailout, still being negotiated, their conclusions remain secret. The British ambassador recently provided a hint and caused a national uproar when he told a Rotary dinner in Ankara that Turkey would do well to follow the “Brazilian example.” ■