

Massacre in Kurdish area highlights Turkey's "village guard" system

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On May 4, 44 people were killed in a massacre carried out in the small village of Bilge located in the province of Mardin in the predominantly Kurdish region of southeast Turkey. Eyewitnesses reported that four masked men opened fire on a wedding party. The attackers, armed with hand grenades and machine guns, came from different directions and stormed the village square where a religious wedding ceremony was being held.

The bride and groom were both killed in the attack. The gunmen then entered some houses and continued shooting. Amongst the victims were children and women, some of whom were pregnant. According to another report the participants at the wedding party were herded together by the assailants and systematically mown down.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Islamist AKP (Peace and Development Party) quickly explained away the tragedy as the result of "customs and habits," although, he said, he could not excuse such a crime. Other cabinet members spoke of unsatisfactory levels of education, while members of the opposition Kemalist nationalist CHP criticized outdated tribal structures, which had to be overcome. Much of the coverage of the massacre in both the Turkish and the international press referred to tribal feuds, blood revenge, honor killings, etc. An undertone of racist contempt for the allegedly "centuries old backward" Kurds could be clearly detected.

It soon emerged, however, that both the assailants and the victims came from different clans of "village guards," Kurdish tribal groups, which receive weapons and payment as well as virtual immunity from prosecution from the Turkish state. Both the automatic weapons and the hand grenades used in the bloodbath had been provided by the state to the assailants in their function as village guards. Even if rivalries surrounding a bride or animosities between hostile family clans played a role, this would be inadequate to explain an act, which wiped out an entire extended family. In fact, the most likely explanation is a feud between rival groups of village guards, which are often heavily involved in

criminal activities.

The origin of these groups goes back to the dying days of the Ottoman Empire when Sultan Abdulhamid II developed the so-called Hamidiye regiments. These paramilitary militias under the command of tribal leaders were given the task of securing the border to Russia, and above all suppressing the Armenian minority, which lived predominantly in east Anatolia. They were heavily involved in the bloody massacres of Armenians in the 1890s.

After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the new regime under Kemal Atatürk issued a law in 1924 to establish village guards, whose job it was to protect villages against the armed gangs active in remote Kurdish regions.

The same law in modified form was used in 1985 by the civilian government of Turgut Özal and President General Kenan Evren, who had led a military putsch in 1980 and took power first as head of the military junta and later as president. A characteristic of the military regime from the start was its anti-Kurdish chauvinism. The use of the Kurdish language was forbidden—even for private use—and Kurdish place names were replaced by Turkish. At the same time it was officially denied that the Kurds even existed. Anyone who claimed the contrary was punished with imprisonment.

The semi-feudal and tribal structures in Kurdish southeast Turkey had already begun to disintegrate in the 1970s, with the growing mechanization of agriculture and urbanization. The proletarian and petit bourgeois layers, which developed at that time, were deserted by the Turkish left and trade unions and turned increasingly to Kurdish nationalism. This was particularly the case after the military putsch of 1980 brutally cracked down on the workers and student movement dominated by the Stalinists and "left Kemalists."

In 1984 the Kurdish-nationalist Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) led by Abdullah Öcalan began its guerilla war. One year later Özal and the military responded with the establishment of the village guard system. This led to the setting up of small private militias by the big land owners (Aghas) on the country's borders to Iran, Iraq and Syria.

These militias were involved in all sorts of criminal activities, particularly smuggling, and their ruthlessness made them a valuable tool for the struggle by the Turkish state against PKK guerillas. The Aghas used their new status to increase their share of land, power and influence against their rivals—often through force.

The village guard system was increasingly extended and became a central instrument for the repression of Kurdish nationalism. In the 1990s the Turkish army in the Kurdish region laid down an ultimatum to the villages—either accept the system of village guards or have their village razed. According to various estimates, there are currently approximately 60,000 village guards, all of whom are paid, armed and protected by the state. In the 1980s and 1990s an estimated third of all village guard forces were implicated in criminal offenses—including drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape and even murder. The close links between the state, organized crime and Kurdish clans loyal to the Turkish state came to light in the Susurluk case, when a car containing a high-ranking police head, a right-wing extremist mafia killer and the conservative parliament delegate and clan boss Sedat Bucak had an accident.

The US-based Human Rights Watch wrote in 2005, “Displaced persons are understandably reluctant to return to remote rural areas where their neighbors, sometimes from a rival clan, are licensed to carry arms, as members of the village guard. Many villagers were originally displaced precisely because they refused to become village guards... Village guards were involved in the original displacement, and in the intervening years have continued to commit extrajudicial executions and abductions. In some cases, village guards are now occupying properties from which villagers were forcibly evicted. They are sometimes prepared to use violence to protect their illegal gains. The failure of successive Turkish governments to hold accountable members of the security forces and village guard for abuses has created a climate of impunity.”

In the meantime it has become clear that the village guard system played an important role in the massacre in Bilge, and some Turkish newspapers have questioned the lack of control by the state over the guards. The AKP government is trying, however, to evade increasing pressure for some sort of action against the village guards. Instead the government is playing for time and making vague promises to set up a commission to examine the system—an obvious attempt to sit out the issue until anger over the Bilge massacre has subsided. Vice-prime minister and government spokesman Cemil Çiçek suggested the system could be reformed or abolished—if necessary.

“But, we should not make decisions based on reactions,” he told the newspaper *Hürriyet*. “The village guard system is

the culmination of long discussions by the government. There could be some who act improperly from time to time within the village guard system,” Cicek continued. “Instead of making a quick decision based on one incident, the issue should be evaluated from many aspects and in detail. Otherwise you accuse those who act properly and work for the unity and well-being of the country.” President Abdullah Gül said the issue needed comprehensive analysis and had safety-related dimensions. It was the experts who should make a decision on the system and the possibilities should be considered.”

There are several reasons for the restraint on the part of the AKP. On the one hand, the party has taken an increasing right-wing stance on the Kurdish question for some time. In March it failed in local elections to displace the Kurdish-nationalist DTP as the strongest party in southeast Turkey. Shortly after the elections a number of DTP functionaries were arrested. On the other hand, any dissolution of the village guards without simultaneous profound social and political changes—which no wing of the Turkish establishment wants—would further destabilize the political situation.

Tens of thousands of Kurdish men, who know nothing other than how to handle a weapon, would see themselves left in the lurch and made unemployed by the Turkish state. Certainly a large section of these guards would simply concentrate on their criminal activities while others could possibly be recruited by the PKK or other armed groups.

Thirdly, the Turkish army has expressly backed the system of village guards. An army speaker declared, “We consider the efforts to depict the village guards responsible for this incident as an institution biased and wrong.”

Representing one wing of the Turkish establishment, the AKP government has consistently avoided any confrontation with the army. Democratic rights, social progress and the dissolution of repressive institutions such as the village guard system can only be accomplished by a joint political struggle of the Turkish and Kurdish workers and suppressed masses.



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