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Faces of Diyarbakir

A look at Turkey's Kurdish minority

Photos and Text by Marlaine Glicksman

While the world turns its eyes to the Kosovo crisis, a similar situation in Turkey goes all but unnoticed. The Kurds in the country's arid and craggy southeast have been undergoing a systematic oppression by the nation's government. And in this



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Faces of Diyarbakir, GEORGE July 1999
Marlaine Glicksman

While the world turns its eyes toward the Kosovo crisis, a brewing parallel in Turkey goes all but unnoticed. The country's Kurds have been undergoing a systematic oppression, one that extends back to the Ottoman Empire and continues today under the present government. And in this case, the United States has been siding with the oppressors.

Predominantly Muslim though secularly governed, Turkey is a strategically located and significant NATO ally of the U.S., which was instrumental in the capture of Abdullah "Apo" Ocalan, leader of the radical Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and who now awaits sentencing for treason in Turkish prison. Though the State Department has recognized the Turkish government's abundant Kurdish human rights abuses—a record that's been an obstacle to Turkey's acceptance in the European Union—it has done nothing to pursue the issue.

There are currently over 10 million Kurds in Turkey, over 90 percent of them in the economically underdeveloped southeast. Yet despite their significant numbers, Turkey's minority is one its government, fearful of nationalism, prefers to suppress, if not obliterate: through silencing Kurdish television and newspapers, arresting and imprisoning Kurdish journalists, and conducting raids on Kurdish outposts in northern Iraq. Kurdish villages have been burned to the ground; civilians and suspected sympathizers have been tortured and murdered; there's been evidence of death squads. At one time both the Kurdish language and music cassettes were banned. Today attempts are being made to remove from office pro-Kurdish People's Democracy party mayors, whose seats Turkey deems "terrorist takeovers," despite their having been gained through democratic vote. With the exception of highlighted terrorist attacks and casualties, news of the Kurds is highly censored by the government, which has frequently banned foreign journalists from Kurdish enclaves.

In 1979, the PKK formed to counter such oppression, often by using guerrilla tactics; their armed campaign accelerated in the '80s. With Apo's capture and likely conviction, which carries the death penalty, the PKK has vowed to step up terrorism, if not civil war. (Apo has now pledged to work as a mediator between the government and the PKK in exchange for his life.)

Diyarbakir, nestled between sweeping steppes and army checkpoints on the Tigris River in southeastern Turkey, is a center of Kurdish politics and discontent. Home to over a half-million Kurds, it's a walled fortress of a city simmering under a severe sun and growing Turkish military presence.

Yet the majority of Diyarbakir's Kurds are hardworking and non-PKK affiliated laborers, engineers, students, doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, mothers, fathers, children. They are a proud, generous, and devout people eager to share a laugh, tea, ice cream, their home, and in a seemingly ironic display of patriotism, the picture of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, that many carry in their pocket. Despite their harsh circumstances and the military surveillance and tanks in their streets, their lives are filled with a lyricism and poetry that are important to witness and preserve, lest they become lost among images of desperate PKK fighters and fleeing refugees.

