



?Mystery? of the (Internationally Ignored) Mardin Massacre

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On May 4th, in the small village of Bilge in the Kurdish-dominated southeastern province of Mardin, Turkey, a group of assailants murdered 44 people, injuring another three, at an engagement ceremony. The victims include 16 women, 3 of whom were pregnant, the bride and groom, and the imam present. Forty-eight children have been orphaned, and another fifty ushered out of town, as their fathers are suspects in the crime. Fifty additional relatives of the suspects have fled to unknown whereabouts for safety reasons. The local gendarmerie has temporarily set up camp for security.

In renouncing any assertions that the incident might be given a rational explanation, the press has done a great job in mystifying the issue: the motives ?remain as unclear as ever? (Hürriyet Daily News, May 9th). Several explanations were proposed, but systemic violence was not one of them.

Following the massacre, the press and government painted two different pictures of Mardin?s social fabric, which in turn are seen to determine the massacre?s cause. The first is a picturesque account of Mardin as a haven of tolerance and neighborliness, where Kurds, Turks, Assyrians and Arabs, Christians and Muslims coalesce in an idyllic ancient city with increasing rates of tourism, but otherwise rampant underdevelopment. The second depiction is Mardin as an economically backward, terror-sponsoring feudal pit where blood feuds are the norm and sheikhs are more trusted as mediators than lawyers in disputes between ?primitive? clans.

Whichever sociological model is utilized to address Mardin, the ruling politicians? opinion of the massacre, and that of the mainstream press, mirrors their perception of ?the Kurdish problem?. Their ideology and touted strategy for the Kurdish problem (lacking any real action or coherence) is an economic one: the problem is not cultural or ethnic, but rather one merely of economic underdevelopment. As much was already known, but succinctly stated by President Abdullah Gül (of the ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP) to Ahmet Türk (co-chair of the Democratic Society Party, DTP, the Kurdish parliamentary unit). DTP has been the cause of much distress, paranoia even, to the anti-secular AKP, due to the former?s electoral success in southeastern Anatolia one month ago, where AKP formerly enjoyed more presence. DTP has subsequently fallen prey to AKP?s infantile internal diplomacy methods for not sufficiently renouncing ties with the (Marxist-Leninist) Kurdistan Worker?s Party (PKK). This has resulted in the arrest and subsequent incarceration of the two newly elected mayors of the southeastern provinces of Diyarbakır and Batman. DTP?s Türk was told by President Gül that the Kurdish problem would melt away as ?democracy? is strengthened, with the criterion for the strengthening of democracy being the rejection of terrorism. What this simple syllogism amounts to is that DTP themselves are terrorists (a sentiment not foreign to Turks).

In early April, 2009 the Prime Ministry issued a report suggesting the implementation of religious education to solve women?s problems in the Southeast, along with calls for cutting health services for families there with ?too many children?. (Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had recently said that Turkish families should have at least three children.) The proposals quickly came under fire from various women?s issues groups, who seemed to successfully take the proposals off the table. AKP, however, seems geared to take advantage of the massacre in order to implement a

like agenda. Mardin's governor, Hasan Duruer, AKP, was quick to suggest after the incident that gender-segregated schools would combat any possible like event in the future. The factors in the massacre were, according to Duruer, jealousy and illiteracy. PM Erdoğan and President Gül were in general agreement with Duruer regarding the causes.

Gül: "Outmoded traditions and practices should be placed under the nation's spotlight. Such primitive and violent acts that cause deep suffering can never be justified in this day and age."

Erdoğan: "No tradition and understanding can justify this action at all. Everybody should fulfill their social responsibilities to prevent a repeat of such incidents in the medium and long run."

With these anagramic deliveries, both heads of state dodged giving a direct evaluation of the massacre by referring to its "lack of justification," as if such were at all relevant.

On the one hand, then, AKP preaches democracy in the Southeast while ridiculing the population, and, on the other hand, seeks to reinforce its feudal remnants by way of religious education. This incoherence is useful in disguising the real cause of the massacre, indeed systemic violence.

In 1985, the Turkish state created a system known as the village guards (korucu in Turkish and Kurdish). The village guards are a state-armed, meagerly salaried (and otherwise work-starved) paramilitary created to combat PKK. The peasants hired as village guards know the land and the language, both of which the military are ignorant. They are the gendarmeries' informants and guinea pigs. When an anti-PKK mission ensues, the armed peasant squads are the first to scope out the scene. Down from a one-point high of 90,000 members, the village guards now number between 50,000-60,000.

A 1996 Interior Ministry report showed that one out of three village guards were involved in criminal activity. This has been confirmed by Human Rights Watch and other humanitarian agencies. The list of crimes has included:

the evacuation of villages; rape; abduction; armed attack; wounded as a result of armed attack; deaths as a result of armed attack; disappearances; summary executions; torture; arrest; suicides; the burning of forests.

The 1990s were witness to the illegal village guard evacuation of non-village guard Kurds. If "justification" were necessary, the latter were seen en masse as potential terrorists, a case easily argued using the for-or-against-us logic of anti-terrorism. A 2004 law invited non-village guard Kurds back to their properties, now largely occupied by the village guards who had kicked them out 10 or so years prior. Some are yet to return.

Who were the perpetrators of the massacre? They were all village guards who shared the same last name as the victims, who were also village guards. In addition to the list of crimes mentioned above, korucu have committed false flag operations scapegoating the PKK. In this latest incident, korucu again used illegal guns. It may have been their intention to once again blame the PKK, but the escape of two potential victims was enough to prevent this. Otherwise, that would have been an easy explanation for the state and the press. They are left giving the excuse claiming that a man of whom the assailants did not approve was set to marry a female relative of theirs.

But Mardin locals claim there was no tension at all between the two sides of the massacre. Nor could tradition have allowed for such an event: in blood feuds people are killed one by one. In traditional, i.e. feudal, punishment mechanisms nobody kills an entire family. So, the point is that even the feudal tradition has some kind of understanding of justice, though certainly limited and problematic. The modern state does not exist in Mardin: no infrastructure, nor any modern justice system except the village guards. Mardin's people have lost their sense of institutional justice. When this comes together with the korucu system, such a massacre can be produced. The massacre must thus further be recognized as the result of systemic, state-sponsored violence. The massacre was a threat to those yet to return to their homes after being ousted by the village guards during the 1990's.

Due to popular pressure, Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek announced on May 7th that the village guard could possibly be dissolved, or at the very least reviewed. The issue had probably received enough attention due to its vocalization by

Emine Ayna, vice president of DTP. Two days after, Interior Minister Be?ir Atalay told reporters, ?We are not working on abolishing the militia (village guard).? Atalay had visited Mardin with AKP deputy Gönül ?ahkulubey, a Mardin native who steadfastly rejected claims that the massacre was the result of a blood feud. She was also quick to dismiss the possibility that it was the product of the village guard. Rather, in her words, it was a product of ?domestic violence,? that is, a women?s issue?best resolved through gender-segregated schooling. After discrediting the blood feud solution, she will probably have to join a new party.

Trauma brought on by such an event as this can understandably lead to an apolitical attitude wherein the burden caused by the trauma forces one to call out an ambiguous ?Why?!? This attitude has been taken advantage of to mask the causes. While the government, the press, and the nation wept, Southeastern Anatolia was said to exhibit tendencies of internalized violence, the cold product of a righteous state war going on twenty-five years. In short, it was their own fault, a mix of feudal tradition and an ultra-violent lifestyle made cold through terror-sponsorship and chance death. So goes the neo-liberal ideology of the post-traumatic era.

The state and military refuse to recognize this event as their own product. The village guard system has severely divided Turkey?s southeastern population, thus working in the state?s favor, albeit feeding the PKK?s resentment. If the facts are avoided, the state?s racist campaign against ?ignorant, violent peasants? and ?primitive village Kurds? will continue, as can be seen, with the massacre excusing their favored course of action, masked in a humanitarian language touting education and democracy.

Israel?s rebuke to PM Erdo?an?s staged dramatic Davos walkout was thus correct: ?Who are you to criticize us??

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