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## Valley of the Wolves: Turkey

Monday, March 13, 2006

**During the nation-building period after the declaration of republic (1923), issues related to confidence-building and identity weighed very heavily. Who were we? Since we no longer bore allegiance to the dynasty that gave its name to the nation (Osman or Ottoman), what would the target of our loyalty and the source of legitimacy of our collective identity be?**

DOĞU ERGİL

During the nation-building period after the declaration of republic (1923), issues related to confidence-building and identity weighed very heavily. Who were we? Since we no longer bore allegiance to the dynasty that gave its name to the nation (Osman or Ottoman), what would the target of our loyalty and the source of legitimacy of our collective identity be?

Characteristic of the working of the "nation-state," a nation designated as Turkish was fashioned along the majority group from the multicultural population inherited from the cosmopolitan Ottoman population. This nation would have a history apart and independent of the ?Ottoman sultanate who had usurped the powers of the nation,? as the founder of the republic, M. Kemal Atatürk, had said. And it had to have a moral superiority as well as higher human qualities over others so it would believe in itself. Yet these ideological constructs ran counter to reality, for the "nation" was poor, underdeveloped, scarcely educated, pre-modern and not industrialized. The putative superiority of the nation was founded on the ?nobility of its blood,? as expressed in founder's famed ?Address to Turkish Youth.?

In order to mobilize the nation on this belief that ran counter to reality, the whole educational and legal system had to be built around the concept of the Turks' superiority. Legal and educational domains were highly "ideologized," and this fabricated "truth" had to be safeguarded from all competing ideologies and challenges. Turkey's courts and schools were thinly woven screens, but whatever escaped through them was caught at the level of the security apparatus. Those who evaded them were eliminated by the "grey wolves," the young nationalist Turks the system had churned out as patriots.

Where does this symbolism come from? In search of pre-Ottoman and pre-Islamic roots, the ideologues of the nation-state referred to ancient legends, or in some cases simply made them up. The legendary wolf that was also shared by Etruscan culture (the she-wolf that nurtured Romulus and Remus) was portrayed as the female wolf that kept alive the only living Turkish warrior by breastfeeding him as he lay with his hands and his feet cut off on an imaginary battlefield after the Turkish army was decimated to the last man by enemies. She carried him to a hidden valley and gave him children that grew into a strong nation, who in turn, conquered the world. Hence, the wolf is an important symbol adopted as the mother of Turks who were not burdened by an unwanted historical baggage and had no master except themselves. In the initial decades of the republican nation-state the wolf became the symbol of Turkish nationalism, and every nationalist considered herself or himself a grey wolf. The symbolism is still used by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and its youth organizations. The wolf is always ready to prey on the enemies of the pack, that is, the enemies of the

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nation.

The fabricated history that served to satisfy the wounded psyche of the heirs of a failed and pauper empire was coupled with a mythical understanding of the sociology of the country. In this sociology only Turks lived in the country that was salvaged out of the catastrophe of World War I, and the Turkish nation is a unified whole with no class distinctions (expressed as "no discrimination; no privileges"). The denial of heterogeneity led to an incessant perception of insecurity when either an ethnic or religious group whose existence was officially rejected demanded a public presence or a kind of civic right. The result was a constant struggle between state and society and between social groups that were favored and disfavored according to the nation-building scheme. These conflicts retarded the political and economic development of the country and rendered the state machinery essentially a security apparatus whose basic function was maintenance of the status quo, officially or ideologically created.

Security was never perceived as "soft security," where system maintenance was realized through high living standards, availability of jobs, educational opportunities, justice, representation, participation and civil liberties. Rather, "hard security" measures were adopted to maintain stability. Law and order predominated the rule of law. Hard security measures were akin to the methods that made the past so glorious: conquest. Hence, use of a degree of force was at the core of the Turkish political culture either in international or domestic relations. Although this is not peculiar to the Turks, the slow pace of modernization, democratization and liberalization retains these qualities to this day.

Violence resorted to patriotic ends (read this as status quo maintenance) and was exalted and proceeded with impunity, especially by official actors. Every expression of difference was punished disproportionately. Ensuing uprisings were brutally repressed and political mobilization was checked by military coups when necessary.

Grey wolves were always called to duty whenever officialdom wanted to clear the scene of unwanted civil actors who made or tried to make their way to the political stage. It was the patriotic thing to do the "clean-up job" of the ultimate authority. That is how patriotism was defined: obedience to the state and serving it (not the county but the state) without questioning the ethical value of the service demanded.

This "grey wolf" ethos turned into freelance criminality just like the ronin of Japan: unemployed (masterless) samurai began to prey on the people whom they once protected. The "grey wolves" who did the dirty work of the ultimate authority with impunity began to engage in criminal activities for personal or group gain. This phenomenon, common in many countries, is called the "Susurluk syndrome" in Turkey since a car accident revealed links between a criminal patriot, the security apparatus and the political class. Yet the criminal who hid behind patriotism and "national duty" was exposed a little more with every passing year as the system became more transparent, until the U.S. military occupation of Iraq.

For many reasons, this invasion raised anxieties in Turkey that Iraq would crumble into statelets and that this process would have a domino effect on Turkey as well. When U.S. military authorities forbade the Turkish military to roam around northern Iraq after Turkey rejected the invasion of Iraq from the north by U.S. forces, this anxiety turned into contempt. In the midst of these adversities, a U.S. military unit arrested, blindfolded and put hoods on a Turkish special forces team. The army is the most exalted institution in Turkey, and Turks felt denigrated and insulted. The feeling of being belittled sticks in Turkey's throat like a nut that hasn't been swallowed.

The "grey wolves" were called to national duty once again, but this time as movie actors (in the film titled "Valley of the Wolves -- Iraq"), not real but as imaginary warriors who taught a mighty lesson to the Americans. What difference does it make whether the lesson is given in real life or on the big screen? We are happy our revenge has been taken. Thank you, "grey wolf," for licking our damaged psyche and healing our wounded souls.

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