The Ultra-Nationalist Grey Wolves: A Turkish Government Tool to Persecute Kurdish People

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The Ultra-Nationalist Grey Wolves: A Turkish Government Tool to Persecute Kurdish People
Diliman Abdulkader

Since its inception, the Turkish government has used the Grey Wolves, a Turkish ultra-nationalist organization, to target Kurds both within the country and abroad to advance Turkish nationalism, in addition to state political and military goals. This article examines the historical context of Turkish nationalism, the Turkish government’s persecution of the Kurds, and the state’s use of the Grey Wolves specifically to persecute the Kurds. The article concludes by offering policy recommendations to resolve the question of Kurdish autonomy in Turkey through peaceful means, with steps the Turkish government can take, and how the United States can play a vital mediating role between the Kurds and Turks.

Historic background on Turkish nationalism and Grey Wolves

Today’s Turkish state was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the creation of the new state, Atatürk promoted a sense of “Turkishness” to create the foundations of Turkish national identity. Atatürk’s nationalist vision is illustrated in the 1930 statement of the Turkish Minister of Justice who said that “the Turk must be the only lord, the only master of this country. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can only have one right in this country, the right to be servants and slaves.”

This nationalist ideology is still present today, as violent groups have formed in the name of defending Turkey and Turkishness. One such group is the Grey Wolves. Founded by Alparslan...
Türkçe in the late 1960s as the paramilitary wing of Turkey's Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi or Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Grey Wolves—"Ülkü Ocaklar" in Turkish—is a fascist, ultra-nationalist, pan-Turkic organization. The group attempts to blend Turkish identity with Islam, as evident in the Grey Wolves's motto: "your doctor will be a Turk, and your medicine will be Islam." The Grey Wolves emerged during the Cold War as an anti-communist paramilitary group and shifted to heavily targeting non-Turkic minorities. Despite the Kurds being majority Sunni Muslims, the Kurds are still targeted due to their strong ethnic identity. Specifically, the group seeks to create a unified Turkic nation from the Balkans to Central Asia made of true and pure Turks—those who identify as Turks, call themselves Turkish, and live in Turkic territories. As such, the Grey Wolves target those who do not identify as pure Turk, including prominent minorities such as the Kurds, through political violence such as targeting pro-Kurdish political parties or Kurdish activists.

The Turkish state and the Kurds
The Kurds make up an estimated 35–45 million people across the Middle East, from Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, all striving for greater rights which acknowledge their identity and existence. They have a unique language, culture, dress, and identity as Kurds, rather than as Arabs, Persians, or Turks. As the largest ethnic minority without a state of their own, they have sought since World War I to establish an independent state. Although independence may be a universal goal among the Kurds, each region has approached the issue differently based on their ideological, historical and geographical reach.

The struggle of the Kurdish people to have their identity recognized in the Middle East is clearly illustrated in Turkey. Though modern-day Turkey holds the largest Kurdish population of about 20–25 million people, the Turkish government is unsympathetic toward Kurdish autonomy and expression of identity. Since 1923, the government has targeted everything Kurdish-related, including Kurdish schools and the Kurdish language. For example, in 1924 the government officially outlawed the words "Kurds" and "Kurdistan." In 1983, Law 2932 went a step further and banned the use of the Kurdish language in both public and private spaces. The law stated that "no language can be used for the explication, dissemination, and publication of ideas other than the first official language of countries, recognized by the Turkish state." The law's repeal in 1991 did not change attitudes toward the Kurdish language. In fact, Human Rights Watch argued, "the constitutional basis for law No. 2932 still exists," citing the continued ban of Kurdish radio under alternative laws such as the 1994 RTUK law, "which mandates the exclusive use of Turkish" in radio and television broadcasting.

Today, discriminatory state practices continue, and the Kurdish language is still considered taboo. For example, in 2009 when a politician spoke in Kurdish in Turkey's parliament, parliament speaker Köksal Toptan stated that "the official language is Turkish, this meeting should have been conducted in Turkish." The Kurdish language was further criminalized in 2003 when the Turkish government banned the use of the letters x, q, and w in names. By taking these letters out of the Turkish alphabet, the government expressly targeted Kurds as these letters are most frequently found in Kurdish names.

The Turkish government's systematic targeting of the Kurdish people has isolated the minority group, increased nationalist movements among the Kurds, and forced them to demand their rights through more violent means. Notably, the persecution of the Kurds led to the creation of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), in 1978, a political group which militarized in 1984. During its early years, the PKK used arms to defend the...
rights of Kurds in Turkey, demanding the self-determination of an independent Kurdistan. Over the years, however, the PKK has regulated its demands. It has shifted from calls for self-determination to demands for greater Kurdish autonomy within the Turkish state, to advocacy strictly for cultural and political rights. Despite the PKK moderating its demands, however, the Turkish government continues to label the Kurds separatists. The Turkish-PKK conflict has therefore not pacified and has had deleterious effects, resulting in the deaths of more than forty thousand people since 1984. Today, Turkey, the European Union, and United States all consider the PKK a terrorist organization because of its continued use of violence to achieve its goals.

Hope for peaceful relations between the Kurds and the Turkish state emerged in 2013 when the PKK’s imprisoned founder, Abdullah Öcalan, and Erdoğan’s administration started peace negotiations. In exchange for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey to the group’s main base in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Turkish government promised to pass reforms advancing Kurdish rights. However, the government failed to uphold its end of the bargain and make any meaningful changes. Tensions increased further in 2014 when the Turkish military failed to assist the Kurds while the Islamic State (IS) sieged the Kurdish town of Kobani in Syria, just across Turkey’s border. Despite the inaction of the Turkish military, Kurdish fighters—with the help of American airstrikes—ultimately defeated IS. Hostilities were exacerbated even more when, as a result of the Kurdish victory, Erdoğan accelerated his attack on Kurds in Turkey and began multiple military campaigns against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. The victory of the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi or Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 2015 election gave more reason for Erdoğan to further crack down on the Kurds. By 2015, the peace process had failed, and no peace treaty was signed. In fact, the Turkish state’s staggering list of human rights abuses against the Kurdish minority only legitimized and encouraged further repression of Kurdish people by organizations such as the Grey Wolves.

Grey Wolves political support and global bans

The Grey Wolves is an ultra-nationalist right-wing Turkish organization, characterized by its salute in which members hold their right arm in the air and depict a wolf with their hand. The Grey Wolves is affiliated with the MHP, which itself is allied and in governing coalition with President Erdoğan’s Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or Justice and Development Party (AKP). Due to the MHP’s political alliance with the AKP, tolerance within the Turkish government for the Grey Wolves has increased. Notably, MHP leadership has given Grey Wolves members government positions in the security and judiciary departments.

The relationship between the government and the Grey Wolves is ultimately beneficial as the MHP and AKP parties use the Grey Wolves as a tool to keep Turkish nationalism alive. This relationship was illustrated when Erdoğan made the Grey Wolves hand salute at a party rally in 2018 and repeated the slogan “one nation, one flag, one state, one homeland” to boost support for his military campaign against the Kurds in Afrin, Syria.

The Grey Wolves is not only used regionally against the Kurds but also in Europe to support pro-Turkish political parties and target critics of the Turkish government abroad. In 2019, the German government estimated that there were about eleven thousand Grey Wolves members in the country, with some estimates at twenty thousand members. Notably, German Green Party lawmaker Cem Özdemir has described the group as Germany’s largest right-wing extremist organization and “the extended arm” of the Turkish president.

The Grey Wolves has thus become a global force which seeks to weaponize its belief against enemies and advance political goals. Because of their violent presence in Europe, the French government banned Grey Wolves members and political organizing in November 2020. The French cited the group’s “extremely violent” activities, and the Interior Minister tweeted that the group “incites discrimination and hatred and is implicated in violent actions.” The Austrian government also acted against the group.
when it banned the Grey Wolves hand salute in 2019. In response, the Turkish government issued a statement that they “do not accept this and strongly condemn it, [as] the ‘Grey Wolves’ salute . . . is the symbol of a legal, political party in Turkey (the MHP).”

The Turkish government lashed out again when the European Union labeled the Grey Wolves a terrorist organization in May 2021. This was after a European Parliament progress report charged the group with “threatening people with a Kurdish, Armenian, or Greek background and anything they consider an opponent.” The Turkish foreign ministry stated that this designation “demonstrated how the European Parliament (EP), which is supposed to be the defender of freedom of expression and thought, is contradictory and prejudiced.”

The Turkish government went on to argue that despite the Grey Wolves’ violent activities, the organization should not be on the terror list because it is considered a legal entity in Turkey by condemning the “call for including a legal movement, which is stated as associated with a long-established political party in our country, into the EU Terrorist Organizations List.”

The United States has also taken strides to designate the Grey Wolves a terrorist organization. Notably, in September of 2021, U.S. Congresswoman Dina Titus introduced an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), calling for “a report on designating Grey Wolves as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” and asking the State Department to determine “whether the Grey Wolves meet the criteria for designation.” Although the amendment did not make it into the final passage of the 2022 NDAA, it was a critical step for a member of U.S. Congress to take against the group.

**Grey Wolves violence against the Kurds**

As demonstrated by Turkish government public statements supporting the group, the Grey Wolves has earned a level of legitimacy within the state, giving it free reign to target the Kurds. The Grey Wolves’ attacks of Kurds are thus beneficial for both the group itself and the Turkish government, the latter of which is able to advance its political agenda through a group alleged to be unaffiliated with the state all while denying responsibility for the group’s violent consequences. A core principle of the Grey Wolves is to ensure the Turkey does not stray too far from its nationalist principles. When Erdoğan won reelection thanks to his party’s alliance with the MHP, Turkish mafia boss Alaettin Çakıcı, who has links to the MHP, was quick to remind Erdoğan how he won at the polls, stating, “you are not the master of the state. Don’t forget, you are only a traveler, and the idealists [Grey Wolves] as well as the Turkish nationalists and all patriots, no matter which ethnic group they belong to, operate the shelter.”

Turkish intelligence official Mehmet Eymür endorsed the government’s logic for using the Grey Wolves against the PKK and Armenians, stating that violent activities “cannot be carried out with ordinary people, we [the Turkish state] need men who can break things.”

The mutually beneficial relationship between the Grey Wolves and the Turkish government has allowed the group to freely target Kurds since the 1970s, resulting in almost six thousand Kurdish deaths. Attacks continue today; in May 2021, the Grey Wolves were accused of targeting a Kurdish family in the city of Konya. In an apparent hate crime, the Grey Wolves reportedly brutally attacked the family with knives and stones and stated, “we are the Grey Wolves, we won’t let you live here.”

Grey Wolves violence extends to political parties. For example, in June 2021, an armed Grey Wolves member attacked the HDP provincial building in Izmir, Turkey, killing twenty-two-year old party member Deniz Poyraz. An HDP official responded to the violence, accusing “the government and the Interior Ministry” to have been the instigators of the attack. The leader of MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, responded in turn, calling Poyraz a “terrorist,” and further legitimizing the attack. Additionally, in 2010, the Grey Wolves attacked and injured a reporter of Dicle News Agency—a “pro-Kurdish” news agency in Tur-
key—for his reporting on violence against the minority group.\textsuperscript{35}

With followers all over the world, Grey Wolves attacks extend beyond Turkish borders. In 2019, as Kurds took to the streets in Germany protesting Turkey's military offensive into northeast Syria, Turkish nationalists affiliated with the Grey Wolves violently confronted protesters. Additionally, in June 2020, Turkish fascist mobs, consisting of approximately one hundred right-wing extremists affiliated with the Grey Wolves, attacked a Kurdish feminist rally in Vienna, Austria.\textsuperscript{36}

### Conclusion

Turkey’s ongoing shift towards absolute authoritarianism under President Erdoğan, his alliance with the MHP—the political wing of the Grey Wolves—and the lack of will to address the question of Kurdish autonomy through peaceful means has emboldened the Grey Wolves to continue targeting the Kurdish people. Turkey's government thus remains complicit in violence against the Kurds and must take action to foster peaceful relations with the minority group.

Broadly, the Turkish government must find enough confidence in Turkey's own identity and history so it does not resort to erasing the identity of the Kurds in order to secure its standing in Turkish society. Arguably, the state’s obsession with eliminating anything symbolic of the Kurds demonstrates its sense of insecurity with the status of Turkish identity and history. Most recently a Kurdish art exhibit was shut down by Turkish authorities in Turkey's largest Kurdish city of Diyarbakır. The art show included “political and video installations that recalled the suffering of the Kurds” under Turkish rule.\textsuperscript{37} Actions such as this only further damage the potential for peace.

More specifically, it is critical that the government peacefully resolves the question of Kurdish autonomy through non-military means, admit to its wrongdoings in the past and present against minority groups, distance itself from the Grey Wolves through public condemnation, and allow for the free expression of all identities within the Turkish state. It must also end its military campaigns against Kurds abroad in Iraq and Syria, as the government's attacks do not solely target the PKK but also Kurds across the region. Using force to raze towns to the ground in the Kurdish majority southeast only bolsters division and increases support for the PKK—the very group Turkey is trying to dismantle. Continuing this policy only proves that the Turkish government inadequately understands Kurdish grievances.

In order to foster peaceful relations with the Kurds and to understand their struggle, the Turkish government must first establish trust with the minority group. One way to do this is to release Kurds who were wrongfully imprisoned following the July 2016 coup against the Erdoğan government on the bases of “terrorism.”\textsuperscript{38} Being Kurdish in Turkey must not be grounds for imprisonment or being labeled a terrorist. Furthermore, the Turkish government must reverse its historic policy of changing the names of Kurdish towns and villages to Turkish ones in order to foster Kurdish recognition and inclusion in Turkish society. Similarly, the government, through parliamentary legislation, needs to allow Kurds to celebrate their culture, such as through the free expression of their language, dress, and music without interference from the state.

The international community can assist with resolving this conflict. For instance, the United States can play a vital role by acting as a third-party mediator between the Kurds and the Turkish government, and by brokering a lasting
peace agreement. By continuing its policy of designating the PKK as a terrorist organization, the United States eliminates any potential avenue to secure peace, and Turkey’s actions against the Kurds remain justified. For peace talks to take place, the United States should therefore delist the PKK as a terrorist organization and grant the Kurds international recognition as a persecuted minority group. In return, the PKK must prove it is committed to peaceful relations by once again calling for a ceasefire.

The international community must also hold the Turkish government responsible for Grey Wolves violence. Up until now, Turkey has been able to act with impunity against ethnic and religious minorities like the Kurds because of its status in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO members must acknowledge that Turkey’s actions are in violation of its founding “democratic values.” If the security bloc refuses to respond to Turkey’s continuous violations, then states must exercise their individual sovereignty and apply economic sanctions to pressure Turkey into upholding the rule of law.

There are several avenues to peace that all stakeholders in the conflict can take to address the question of Kurdish autonomy, but peace-building begins with the actor who has the most leverage: the Turkish government. The Turkish government must have the desire for change to bring about lasting peace. For Kurds and Turks to move forward, the Turkish government must also realize that there is more to gain from peace than military campaigns to please its nationalist base. Investing in a peace between the PKK and the Turkish government will save lives, bring stability to the region, strengthen the country’s economy, and improve the quality of life of Kurds and Turks alike.

Notes
25. “Will the Grey Wolves Erdogan’s long arm in the world end up on EU and US terrorist list?” The Times of India, September 20, 2021.