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## Book Review

### **Milada Dönüş: Ulus-Devletten Devlet-Ulusa Türk ve Kürt Meselesinin Üç İkilemi (Return to Point Zero: From Nation-State to State-Nation, The Three Dilemmas of the Turkish and Kurdish Question)**

Murat Somer

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The Kurds's recent global (such as resistance to the onslaught of ISIS), regional (such as transcending borders) and domestic (such as historical and present criminalization of their ethnicity) experiences in the Middle East have increasingly been subject analytical scrutiny. Murat Somer's comprehensive and interdisciplinary evaluation of the political and social origins, and of the historical as well as current progression of these issues offers lucid insights into this highly complex topic.

Somer's overall argument is that the "Kurdish Problem" is not a conflict one can predominantly attribute to factors directly linked with the Kurds and the Kurdish issue themselves, such as Kurdish nationalism, Kurds' social and political demands and Turkish nationalists' views of the Kurds. Rather, it is more a consequence of other processes and goals associated with the modern Turkish state-formation processes.

As his title indicates, Somer locates the origins of the issue in 1918–26, the formative years of the Turkish Republic during the post-World War I era. He suggests that the historical conditions and the basic questions of the time resemble the contemporary ones so that a comparative study of these conditions and questions may provide answers to the ongoing complex issues. He specifies identity, power and security as the critical crossroads where "dilemmas" pertaining to modernization, religion and changing geopolitical conditions emerged and led to clashes about common identity, collaboration of elites and external insecurity. "Kurdish Problem" is a not-so-inevitable byproduct of these dilemmas.

In pursuing this argument, Somer pays close attention to structural and historical contingencies that emerge from the past and lead to the present. In that sense, the book fulfills most of its goals as a broad and inclusive historical documentation and as an original political analysis that can both be accessible for non-academic audiences and lay foundations for future research.

Somer's work is analytically potent. In his conceptualization of nation, nationalism and nationhood, he follows R.G. Suny's "radical middle position" which accepts parts of, yet transcends, both primordialist and constructivist perspectives by acknowledging the socially constructed qualities of identities and limited cultural resources of politically powerful elites in forging their national projects. Somer also recognizes the "nation as narration" perspective as he incorporates facts and stories of these facts as constitutive elements of processes and outcomes. His synthetic and interdisciplinary analysis is inspired by elements of structuralism, institutionalism, constructivism and some rational-choice perspectives.

In light of these premises, Somer argues that Kurds could have been successfully incorporated into a project of Turkish nation-state (or state-nation) depending on the proper elite choices and actions in given historical moments of international, regional and domestic circumstances. Overall, he argues, such opportunities have been constantly, if not conveniently, missed by the state actors who often act as agents of short-term interests and political battles.

Carefully differentiating between the "Kurdish Question," that is, a product of the modern era nationalisms of many populations and the "Kurdish Problem," that is, the inability in handling the Kurdish issue with long-term and peaceful solutions, Somer wants to show that not all aspirations of nationhood translate to separatism and violent clashes. Rather, the problem has been produced by state actors who make choices and take actions in specific cultural, ideological and historical-institutional structural contexts. The intersection of these structures and the role of agency calls for analytical reconceptualizations of many standard narratives of nationhood, nationalism and nation-state.

"State-nation" is conceptualized and presented as a much convenient and plausible organizational setting to overcome the limitations of the political and cultural claims of monolithic uniformity of "nation-state" understanding (Chapter II). Initial nation-state formation of Turkey is identified as the project that inadvertently created the "Kurdish Problem" because the critical three dilemmas, namely external insecurity, elite collaboration and shared identity, could not be effectively resolved.

The first dilemma was consequential when the territories of the Kurds of the Ottoman Empire were divided up between new post-Great War nation-states, Turkey, Iraq and Syria, and pan-Kurdist aspirations could not be avoided, thereby closely linking Turkey's issues of regional security with the "Kurdish Question." The second dilemma, the improbability of elite collaboration, has evolved due to the political actors' inability to act in concert as a result of their entrenched ideological differences, distrust and power battles that prevented them from effectively addressing the "Kurdish Question." Finally, the inability to develop a common identity that could accommodate the rights of Kurds without raising identity concerns among the Turkish majority—who went through their own nation-building process and are still confronted with divisions and ambiguities over the content of their own identity—was not achieved. The conflicts and tensions that resulted from these dilemmas were neither inevitable nor unilinear, and they could have been

resolved by employing alternative approaches to issues of security, elite collaboration and identity formation.

Somer suggests that these interrelated dilemmas could be partly resolved through various means, including a sound foreign policy and regional socio-economic policies that could build functional dependencies and mutual trust with domestic and across-the-border Kurds; a democratic dialogue and reconciliation among the political elite by mobilizing moderate political actors; or new and flexible approaches toward issues of common identity, ethnicity, nation and sovereignty that could help to address the “Kurdish Problem” peacefully. Because he wants to step away from monolithic conceptualizations and practices of nation-state, and, following Stepan, Linz and Yadav’s conceptualization of “state-nation,” Somer proposes a reorganized state-formation that provides maximum autonomy for national groups without compromising existing territorial integrity and political sovereignty. He argues that in Turkey a common national identity can and has to be adopted through multiple self-identifications.

Somer’s strongest point is to reveal that such processes and interactions cannot be reduced to narratives of purposeful political actors or be understood as the inevitability of nationhood and nationalism. In that respect, Somer does not necessarily see “Turkish identity, nationalism and nation-state” per se as the culprits for the Kurdish issue. The present forms of these, Somer states, are as much products of this conflict as they are causes of it. He invites the reader to re-evaluate nineteenth century socio-economic, demographic, political and intellectual dynamics as the causal processes that led to the contemporary Kurdish Problem. According to Somer, during the foundational years of Turkish Republic, the common identity imagination of the elites have been reconfigured when Kurdishness was deemed unfit for the national unity, first as a rival and later as an antagonistic identity for the population living within the boundaries of the new nation-state. The war-time discourse that was more in tune with “state-nation” (rather than nation-state) and acknowledged collaboration with the Kurds was soon abandoned when Mosul was lost (external insecurity dilemma), and state actors deeply disagreed among themselves first over the ideal path of modernization in terms of the religion-secularism question (elite cooperation dilemma) and later, as a reflection of this particular disagreement, over the response to Kurdish rebellions. Simultaneously, Kurdish identity concerns and demands for recognition took a back seat to the goal of building a Turkish nation from a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population. Consequently, the narrative shifted from “nation of Turkey” to “Turkish nation.” Kurdish existence was first legally denied, then perceived as a threat leading to this large minority demanding recognition (identity dilemma).

Somer detects the similar critical dilemmas in the contemporary “Kurdish Problem” under shifting conditions and political actors. The regional insecurity resulting from the wars and transformations of the Middle East, lack of collaboration among moderate elites especially due to the clashes between Islamism and laicism, and inability to craft a common identity that citizens can embrace with “different names and as equals to their diverse ethnic-national identities” still prevail as the

factors that create obstacles to finding a feasible resolution. Somer identifies a number of historical and contemporary opportunities during which different choices, actions and policies could have addressed the “problem” democratically and eliminated it peacefully. Opportunities for collaboration and coexistence were present during and in the post-World War I periods, but were vanished. Later, any prospects for a peaceful and democratic resolution were lost a second time and culminated in the violence and mayhem of the 1990s, starting with the period when freedom of expression of urban, educated Kurdish elites were denied in in the 1950s and 1970s.

In early twenty-first century, similar lack of collaboration between Islamists, who at some point seemed to envision an,—albeit false—sense of social tolerance, and laicists, who have been deeply concerned with their own dwindling political and cultural power, again have produced an impasse for the resolution of the Kurdish Problem, while post-war border arrangements of the Middle East are being challenged by various actors, increasing security issues for all countries in the region. His account of the emergence and persistence of the PKK as a regional actor is serene, sound and successful. His is not a political or politicized account, but powerful in locating the armed group within the contemporary polity of the Turkish state-formation. Somer conceptualizes violence as a likely consequence of unresolved interest conflict and discursive polarization but—as in other studies—violence remains undertheorized in his account.

Somer certainly makes a convincing case with his ample documentation and original analysis providing foundations for future research and discussions on the same topic. His comparison of 1920s and 2000s navigates successfully within his proposed theoretical framework and is always supported by historical, political and some sociological evidence. His structural analysis and emphasis on processes of contingency is highly appreciated and productive. Yet, while paying close attention to continuities and change, this work could pay more consideration to institutionalized patterns of government action directly targeting Kurds such as criminalizing ethnicity, policing and educational policies that persistently prevail across governments and political eras. Similarly, when Somer builds a succinct case for Turkishness as the identity of the majority population, he neglects to evaluate how much and how far such institutional patterns and their cultural impact have been constantly contributing to this identity construction. Explaining Kurdish Problem as the byproduct of other conflicts and issues is definitely a valuable contribution, but there are many purposeful policies that perpetuate the problem and inform the agents of change. At times, Somer seem to address this issue by calling upon cognitive deficiencies (pp. 333–356) and gaps of some state actors and actions (e.g. p. 277) but any discussion of intellectual preparedness regarding the Kurdish issue and rational decision-making based on long-term common interests (e.g. pp. 174, 377) unavoidably calls for questions of interest and stakes as understood and expressed by the agencies, which Somer handles in a rather cursory and limited manner (e.g. p. 318).

All this, however, could be the task of future research which will have to pay dues to Somer for providing us with almost a meta-analysis of the existing literature and

with expanding our analytical horizons in his attempt to compel us to think beyond received theoretical and practical boundaries of nation-state.

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