

War at Home, War in the World

Via [LeftEast](#)

Villagers in the Turkish province of Konya [murdered a whole family of Kurdish farmers](#) on Friday, July 30. It was a premeditated massacre that announced itself well ahead of time to anyone willing to notice. Neighbors in the farming village of Hasanköy in central Anatolia had assaulted the Dedeoğulları family of seven twice before, the first time in a gang of sixty. On both occasions the police and prosecutors let the ring-leaders go after a brief detention. That the murder was racially motivated is indisputable: during the first assault, the mob yelled, “we will not harbor Kurds” (*Kürtleri barındırmayacağız*)! and demanded that the family sell its plot, the only Kurdish-held plot in the village. Yet Interior Minister [Süleyman Soylu maintains](#) that the Turkish-Kurdish tensions had nothing to do with the killing, ascribing it instead to a feud that goes back eleven years.

The murder has crowned a summer of escalating racism in Turkey, which has not been confined to supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Shamefully, members of the mainstream opposition have also contributed. Without pretending that any ideological analysis can fully explain what makes a village massacre its neighbors, let us take a look at the political background to this exceptionally gruesome crime.

Everyone knows that the murder of a Kurdish family does not happen in isolation. It is not, alas, the only such murder to take place this summer. In June, a man walked into the İzmir headquarters of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) with an assault rifle and killed a young woman working there. Several Kurdish laborers have been killed over the last few months in apparent hate crimes. When the [bar associations](#) of fifteen of Turkey’s eighty-one provinces

published an open letter condemning the murders, a pro-AKP newspaper [responded with a front-page headline smearing](#) the lawyers' professional organizations as a front for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Such headlines represent a more or less direct incitement to further violence against Kurdish people in Turkey. Forty-eight provincial bar associations [condemned the smear and expressed solidarity](#) with their colleagues.

Were it not for the greater conflagration that has taken place in neighboring Syria—where Assad's troops have become known for chanting that they would sooner “burn” their “country down” than let him lose power—it would not seem too much to say that Turkey is now burning, literally as well as figuratively. As in many other parts of the northern hemisphere this summer, wildfires have been raging out of control over the last few weeks in several parts of the country. Especially ravaged have been the pine forests in the mountainous regions abutting most of Turkey's Aegean and Mediterranean coastlines. Rumors abound as to who started them: perhaps careless vacationers lighting one of the many portable ovens ubiquitous on Turkish camp sites, or contractors eager to clear protected forests in hopes that the state will then open them to construction for profit. It is worth noting that in one forest near the popular vacation city of Bodrum, a [hotel evacuated due to the fires](#) was later discovered to have been built on ground that first became available to capital when a previous fire destroyed a protected forest!

Yet these are not the most incendiary rumors abroad. [Pro-government media report](#) that the PKK lit the fires. First, the press reported that a PKK suspect was caught setting a fire by a military base in Ankara province, then later stories added many other fires to which a group called “Children of Fire” (*Ateşin Çocukları*) took responsibility, over the Internet, claiming to serve the PKK cause. The group in question had

never been heard of before, and [oppositional writers have questioned](#) the lack of hard evidence and the authenticity of the online confession, which uses diction not characteristic of PKK groups.

It is now hard to remember that the party in power once promised to “solve” what is called “the Kurdish problem” (*Kürt sorunu*) by diplomatic means, enraging Turkish nationalists who now form part of its governing coalition. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since the “peace process” (*barış süreci*) broke down in 2015. The collapse occurred just after the years of negotiations had the unintended side-effect of helping the peaceful wing of the Kurdish national movement, the Peace and Democracy Party (HDP) to garner so many votes in the 2015 parliamentary elections as to deny the AKP its parliamentary majority. Running on a social-democratic and post-nationalist platform that attracted votes from left-wing Turks as well as Kurds, the HDP suddenly became a threat that had to be dealt with. Soon afterward, those in the Kurdish movement intent on a violent solution and those in the state who wanted the same colluded—antagonistically, of course—to resume the fighting.

Since then, the HDP has been fighting for its life, its leaders jailed and/or removed by fiat from their posts in parliament and city government, whole districts stolen from their elected leaders and given to AKP officials handpicked by a president who now rules largely by decree. The unsuccessful military coup of July 2016 gave the AKP what Erdoğan himself described as a “gift from God” ([Allah'ın lütfu](#)), a chance to transform the republic into what increasingly resembles a dictatorship, with no real checks on police power, an appointed press maven who censors the media, and tanks set up at the entrance to major cities to check motorists' papers. Needless to say, at the center of this system sits “the struggle with terrorism” (*terör ile mücadele*), a national cause in which all official enemies, from Abdullah Öcalan to

Fethullah Gülen and nefarious “external agents” (*dış mihrakları*) are rolled into one. Fighting this many-headed hydra is the duty of all who are “local and national” (*yerli ve milli*).

It is of course helpful to have such a hydra—some of whose heads really exist—when you are concurrently beset by so many catastrophes. These include catastrophes of nature—not only forest fires but also deadly floods in the humid northeast of the country—catastrophes of the social second nature—an economic crisis—and catastrophes of society trying to protect itself from nature—the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course the boundary between nature and culture is porous, and when one thinks through the context, one finds that all of these crises are connected. Yet the connections transcend the national level and are hard for a national consciousness to cognize—and consciousness in Turkey is *very* national. To clarify this point, we must consider one further crisis, perhaps the one most visible to many Turks.

Seeking Refuge in Racism

I am referring to the crisis concerning refugees. Some call it a “refugee crisis” and others, a “racism crisis.” Nowhere is it more acute than in the Middle East. As everyone knows, Turkey is the terminal point on the Middle East continuum, where things just barely begin to be “European” or “western.” Unfortunately, this cliché has serious consequences in the material, social world. People living on the “bridge between East and West” are predisposed to strong feelings toward groups of millions who get stuck on that bridge, by agreement between the Turkish government and the European Union (EU).

Turkey is a country of roughly eighty million people, now hosting just short of four million Syrian refugees. That is several times as many as the number of people whose sudden entry into Germany in 2015 occasioned a sharp nativist backlash, giving Angela Merkel’s center-right Christian

Democratic Union (CDU) a serious challenge from the right. A country with roughly the same population as Germany but a far smaller economy, Turkey is responsible for far more refugees—the official number being by most accounts a *very* conservative estimate. Examined a comparative European framework, the thing most surprising about anti-refugee racism in Turkey is that there has not been more of it. But it is there, and very disturbing, and becomes more so over time. This summer it has reached what one must hope is a climax.

In the pre-Covid summer of 2019, the last time when I was out and about to the extent that I could make an effort to gauge the public mood, I heard anti-Syrian sentiment coming from every direction: educated middle-class people, an old lady in hijab with a bag of handpicked onions beside her on a train, men working at an auto repair shop, all telling me how much trouble “Syrians” were causing and how the state needed to send them back. This topic emerged from the most casual small talk, not through my efforts.

In 2016, [I argued](#) that the EU’s plan to pay Erdoğan’s government to house refugees inflamed the apparent “clash of civilizations” between “the West” and “Islam” by empowering reactionary culture warriors on both sides of the divide. By formalizing Turkey’s role as Europe’s gatekeeper—the depo for unwanted Muslim migrants—the EU implicitly recognized Erdoğan as spokesman and protector of Europe’s Islamic hinterland, giving geopolitical imprimatur to a spatial separation between the two “civilizations.” A government working to redefine national identity and restructure social life in religious terms gains leverage over Europe because of the latter’s determination to keep Muslims out.

I now see that this thesis understated the case, underestimating the agreement’s potential to stoke culture wars *within* Turkey. This summer, long-simmering resentments have boiled over into a nativist reaction in which the worst features of the mainstream opposition become ever more

visible. Many secular nationalists are angry with the West for making Turkey take in so many eastern refugees, angry with the government for doing the West's work, and angry with the refugees themselves for things nativists always allege: taking jobs, making public spaces crowded and dirty, having too many children, having fun on the native taxpayer's dime, etc.

Minding One's Business

These allegations are familiar from nativist resentment in Europe and North America, but there are also locally specific factors. While anti-migrant resentment almost always has a strong economic dimension, in most places there is at least somewhat more clarity about what economic role the newcomers are actually playing. One can hardly get out in Turkey these days without hearing unsubstantiated rumors on this issue, as when a man in an auto repair shop in Ankara told me that the whole neighborhood ran (unofficially) on Syrian labor. One quote that has made the rounds belongs to Hikmet Tanrıverdi, chairman of Turkey's textile exporters' association, who said that "[Syrians have saved us](#), the textile industry of the Sea of Marmara region, from the economic crisis." Tanrıverdi specified that "two million" Syrians have helpfully taken the place of 500,000 Bangladeshi workers he had been hoping to import.

Because both the true number of Syrians in Turkey and their rate of employment is nebulous, their presence is the object of all manner of fears and claims, not least concerning foreign policy—the true home of conspiracy theories. Turks see their own soldiers head into Syrian war zones while Syrian refugees leave their country behind. In a country with a conscript army and proverbs like "every Turk is born a soldier" ([her Türk asker doğar](#)), Turks are acculturated to think that, in a time of war, citizens owe their country their lives. I have heard so many people criticize Syrians for fleeing rather than fighting in their civil war! When on rare occasions I have asked for further clarification, the speaker

did not seem to have given much thought to which army the Syrians should be serving. What mattered was that in war, one fights. Instead, Turks see their own soldiers fighting, which does not seem right.

Now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has promised to keep Turkish troops in Afghanistan to [guard the airport after the US withdrawal](#). Turkey is supposed to keep order after the world's strongest army gives up. At the same time, Afghans are heading to Turkey. Turkish media is awash with [images of tens or maybe hundreds of thousands of Afghans](#), mostly young men, trekking across Iran to flee four decades of war and the looming Taliban takeover. Again, many people think, shouldn't *they* be fighting for *their* country rather than relying on our soldiers? Let's keep them here, and the Afghans can stay home too, they think.

This thought is not reasonable, but there is a reason behind it, or to be precise, a doctrine. One of the phrases adorning statues of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk throughout the republic is "Peace at Home, Peace in the World" (*Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*), which means roughly: "we keep the peace in our own country and leave other countries alone. We advise you to do the same." This formula suited the needs of the early Kemalist government that dealt harshly with Kurdish and anti-republican rebellions while staying out of World War II and other international entanglements. What people acculturated in the Kemalist "national defense" (*Kuvayi Milliye*) tradition see in Erdoğan's machinations is an exchange of Turkish soldiers for refugees. Turks go eastward to mess with other people's business, saddling Turkey with foreigners at home. Foreign intervention, whether for NATO or for whatever the AKP was trying to do in Syria, seems to go hand in hand with foreigners coming to Turkey.



Monument in Manavgat, Turkey. Source: waymarking.com.

Moreover, “peace at home” (the state’s prerogative to put down rebellion) and “peace abroad” seem linked in another way as well: disunity at home tends to be blamed on foreigners. Whatever disasters the US state and army trigger among Turkey’s eastern neighbors, anti-Americanism in Turkey overwhelmingly takes the form of assumptions that the USA is behind the PKK. Europe, too, is under suspicion, and even many avowed leftists believe that stamping out internal guerrilla rebellion is an anti-imperialist act.

National Populism

Against this ideological background, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) founded by Atatürk has a balancing act to perform if it wants to uphold the Kemalist legacy while showing some solidarity with the victims of the AKP’s most egregiously dictatorial moves. After all, many of these moves have targeted people involved in pro-Kurdish politics. Cracks within the party have been visible for some time, with one faction prioritizing a human rights discourse at odds with the old nationalist hardliners. The party’s new standard-bearers, the mayors who took over Istanbul and Ankara in the breakthrough elections of 2019, have been at pains not to burn bridges with either HDP supporters or anti-Erdoğan nationalists.

Meanwhile, the AKP has its own nationalism question. When the peace process ended, the government sought new allies on the ultra-nationalist right. The National Movement Party (MHP), a

quasi-fascist party that earned its stripes killing leftists on the streets in the run-up to the 1980 military coup, has become a key partner, its current leader Devlet Bahçeli doing his best to play kingmaker. After the 2016 coup attempt permanently discredited the Gülen movement as government allies, the AKP courted some of their nationalist rivals, selectively embracing Atatürk images and quotes that had once seemed out of place in their movement.

As Bahçeli became an Erdoğan loyalist, his party split in two. The primarily coastal and relatively secular wing of the party joined former Interior Minister Meral Akşener into the new “Good Party” (*İyi Parti*) whose name in capitals (İYİ) looks like the eleventh-century [emblem of a nomadic Turkic people](#) that entered Anatolia along with the Seljuks. While Bahçeli’s more culturally conservative faction joined the AKP bloc, iron lady Akşener brought her group into a coalition with the CHP. Some commentators think that the pivotal role played by each half of the old MHP has pulled both blocs in a nationalist direction.

In any case, the appearance of yet another refugee wave has tipped the scales further toward nationalism. CHP chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu made a shrewd first move with a tweet promising Europe “tough negotiations” over refugee allotments once the CHP comes to power (which will happen any day now...). Reminding foreign sparring partners that unlike Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu “[comes from the Kuvayi Milliye tradition](#)” and will not just do the West’s bidding, the opposition leader refused to turn his country into an “[open-air prison for refugees](#).” In spite of the humanitarian vocabulary, supporters quickly read the tweet as a promise to expel all Syrians pronto. When one [Turkish academic stationed in Berlin reminded](#) Kılıçdaroğlu that the Geneva Convention grants refugees rights that he would have to respect, she received a wave of hate mail, threats and trending memes mocking or condemning her for receiving EU funding at her current post:

clearly this is someone in the enemy's pocket. Similarly, the editor of the news platform [Medyascope](#) fell under [suspicion](#) for getting [funding from a US-based NGO while publishing stories sympathetic to refugees](#). This funding caught the attention of state Communications Director (i.e. censor-in-chief) Fahrettin Altun, who [promised to investigate, and hoped to ban](#), the foreign funding of journalists. This wrinkle calls into question the notion that Erdoğan's government is as fanatically pro-refugee as oppositional nationalists claim, but the latter seem not to have noticed that fact.

The wave crested (hopefully) when Tanju Özcan, the CHP mayor of Bolu, a small provincial capital about halfway between Ankara and İstanbul, [promised a novel strategy](#) for ridding his town of Syrians: charging all households held by non-Turkish citizens ten times the normal price for running water. He added ominously, ["I will not step back from this, no, I will do more."](#) Instantly, the popular social wiki site Sour Dictionary (*Ekşi Sözlük*) carried pages of comments under the heading, ["Tanju Özcan is my candidate for president."](#) The CHP mayors of İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir, Turkey's three largest cities, quickly criticized Özcan. Tunç Soyer of İzmir said most clearly that locals must [learn to live with the refugees](#) among them, though he later distinguished his duty as mayor to provide for all city residents, including refugees, from the "open border" policies of the national government. İstanbul mayor [Ekrem İmamoğlu stated](#) that his municipality had scrupulously cooperated with United Nations agencies to provide for refugees in the city, though he estimated that there were at least three times as many of them as the half million registered with the government. While condemning Özcan's plan to deprive people of survival needs, he also identified the refugees' presence as a potential ["platform for demographic change"](#) that should be "openly discussed."

Condemning Özcan's measures in the name of the party, the CHP

leadership promised to “investigate” him, while promising to [“send our Syrian guests home” once they can go home “safely,”](#) “without subjecting them to any discrimination in the meantime.” The word “guest” frames the entire refugee discussion in Turkey. It is Erdoğan’s word of choice as well. While “refugee” is a category in human rights law, the guest-host relationship is bound only by custom. Guest-friendship (*Misafirperverliği*) is a big theme in Turkey, in a Mediterranean tradition going back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. Any foreigner who has spent time in Turkey knows that Turks identify their hospitality as a national trait. Yet hospitality is a hierarchical relation. The desire to outdo oneself in service to a guest is a bit like the potlatch: the more you give, the greater you are. In the end, there is such a thing as overstaying one’s welcome. The CHP’s unwillingness to part with this word shows the limits of its humanitarianism, which is not, after all, the same thing as “hospitality.”

Real Threats and Bogus Explanations

What, then, do the CHP’s traditional supporters have against refugees, aside from the grievances that seem to crop up wherever people socialized under capital receive uninvited “guests”? To answer that question, we need to review what they have against a government that they perceive as the migrants’ patrons. The most troubling thing about CHP nativism is its suspicion that the refugees are not recipients of goodwill but rather part of a grand plan hatched by the Turkish government at the opposition’s expense. And part of what makes this suspicion so troubling is that in a certain sense, it is true.

It hardly needs stating at this point that Erdoğan has found in the refugees [a diplomatic weapon to use against Europe](#). The EU has some symbolic capital invested in appearing to champion human rights. Time and again the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), to which Turkey is a signatory, decides against Turkey and the government sneers that the decision “[is not](#)

[binding on us.](#)” Yet by taking advantage of Europe’s determination to keep refugees out, Erdoğan gets to pose as a great statesman and partner. The criticism necessarily grows fainter. On the same day that (the few) oppositional papers in Turkey reported Angela [Merkel praising Turkey](#) for its handling of the migration crisis, the same papers were discussing a [hit-list](#) leaked by sources in the German police, bearing the names of oppositional journalists and politicians from Turkey who now reside in Germany. Leftist journalist [Erk Acarer has already survived an assault](#) that may have been a murder attempt. What does the refugee agreement mean to people like him in Turkey and abroad?

Unfortunately recognition of the state’s cynical ploy quickly morphs into conspiracy theories resembling those we hear elsewhere, but which local conditions render superficially plausible. The idea is that Erdoğan’s government is deliberately importing people of his own cultural type in order to [change the social fabric of the country](#). This was long the suspicion of those who claimed to see Syrians voting in Turkish elections—a rumor that has been proven false.

In every country where Middle Eastern refugees have headed, people have feared that they included violent fundamentalists or at least men who make things difficult for women in public spaces. We all remember the group assaults on women in Köln in 2015, which would supposedly happen again and again once the refugees arrived. It did not, but that did not stop the panic from repeating itself. Yet these fears, however dangerous they are anywhere, have a somewhat different valence in Turkey. The difference is worth unravelling, not in order to defend an indefensible nativism, but to show what makes it hard to confront.

The patriarchal conservatism that many Turks, like Europeans, stereotypically ascribe to Middle Eastern migrants is on the rise in Turkey itself. Erdoğan’s repudiation of the Istanbul Convention has further emboldened those hoping to regiment

everyday life in accord with a conservative understanding of religion. This summer, public medical schools announced that the Hippocratic oath's anti-discrimination clauses [do not apply to LGBT patients](#), because that would violate "[our Islamic values](#)," and the women's Olympic volleyball team has come under fire for playing a game some deemed unsuitable to "[daughters of Islam](#)." Unfortunately, everyday resistance to such attitudes is all too often wrapped in a discourse that identifies people with geographies and the latter with invariant traits and values. Thus a video of a child in an Istanbul square telling off two older men who were ordering him not to eat ice cream during Ramadan made the phrase "[go back to Arabia!](#)" go viral. This essentially racist discourse explains how Afghan refugees can become scapegoats for what some Turks dislike about their own society. As always, the government's rhetoric helps reinforce this ugly habit of its mainstream opposition. Erdoğan's strange attempt to extend an olive branch to the putative enemy by declaring that Turkey has [no disagreement with the Taliban "in matters of religion"](#) sufficed to occasion cries of "The Taliban is coming," a typical conflation of refugees with [forces that many of them are fleeing](#).

The Main Enemy is Not Only at Home

Few in Turkey know very much about what has been going on in Syria or Afghanistan. In Syria, Turkey's own troubles are a distorting lens. The more Erdoğan condemned Assad, the more many oppositional Turks and Kurds inclined in the opposite direction, especially when reports emerged of [Turkish weapons shipments to jihadist groups](#) (for which the journalists have been imprisoned or forced into exile). In 2015, Kurds trapped in the besieged cities of Cizre and Nusaybin saw [Arabic-speaking fundamentalists among the Turkish special forces](#), and even now, HDP parliamentarians face prison terms for [encouraging Kurdish protest](#) against the state's attempt to [prevent support from reaching Kobani](#) when it was under

attack by ISIS. In the more recent Turkish incursion on Afrin in Northern Syria, for which Turkey's [Directory of Religious Affairs declared holy war](#), Arab jihadists have [assisted the Turkish troops](#) and [killed Kurdish civilians](#) once the fighting was over. Meanwhile, ISIS attacks in Turkey itself had left 460 dead and 2,000 wounded by 2017 (Erk Acarer, *IŞİD ve Türkiye*, İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2017, 47). Several of these attacks targeted Kurdish and anti-AKP activists.

While the AKP's visible involvement with jihadist groups dovetails with Assad's claims that the Syrian rebellion was all about them, the long history of pogroms and discrimination against Turkish Alevi communities conditions them and their allies to think of the Syrian Alawites (also called *Alevi* in Turkish) as underdogs. This history is an especially fraught topic under a president who has called the Alevi house of worship (*cem evi*) an "[orgy house](#)" (*cümbüş evi*), presided over the police killing of eight Alevi Gezi Park protestors, and let the statute of limitations expire for perpetrators of a [1993 massacre](#) of thirty-five people at an Alevi-leftist gathering. Erdoğan has taunted Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for his own Alevi identity, [inciting crowds to boo him on this account](#) and associating him with Assad. Though Kılıçdaroğlu condemned Assad's "[disproportionate use of force](#)" early on, his [2012 claim](#) that Assad and Erdoğan bore equal blame for the Syrian crisis was itself wildly disproportionate, and this type of statement has set the tone for most secularist and leftist discussion of Syria. There has been [little coverage](#) in Turkish oppositional media of the measures Assad has taken to prevent the return of refugees, many of whom [face homelessness, arrest, or death at home](#).

What many CHP and HDP supporters know or think they know about Syria is how it relates to them. They know that their president has worked with jihadist groups there, against a nominally secular and anti-imperialist government led by an "Alevi." (That Assad is neither [secular](#) nor [anti-](#)

[imperialist](#) is another story). When Syrians appear in Turkey, many think they must be Erdoğan's co-conspirators. In Eastern Turkey, the government has at times chosen to cluster predominantly Sunni refugees [in places that had an Alevi or Kurdish majority without them](#), just as Erdoğan plans to [resettle Arab refugees](#) in Kurdish regions under occupation in Syria. In these local contexts, though not in Turkey as a whole, suspicions that the government is using refugees for demographic engineering begin to look not so unfounded.

Turkey has multiple minorities whose immediate interests and narratives do not coincide. A government that operates in the most opaque manner, with no sense of responsibility to any of these groups, while continually enlisting new names on its list of public enemies and calling all of its political opponents terrorists, cannot be trusted to manage mass resettlement without arousing resentments. In this atmosphere, conspiracy theorizing becomes a coping mechanism, though it exacerbates the illness of which it is a symptom. There can be little doubt that a public discourse that legitimates resentment of Arabs also encourages violence against Kurds and vice versa, but the climate of universal suspicion is also likely to further hostility between these two groups. People from Mardin province, where they are the two predominant ethnicities, tell me that such tension is longstanding.

What's Their Story?

Yet it would be silly to locate anti-migrant sentiment solely or primarily in groups that experience such antagonisms directly. On a more general level, phobic fantasies picture refugees as jihadists, predatory men who put women in danger, and informal workers who undercut the working class wage. The difficult truth is that all three groups do feature in the AKP's governing strategies, whether or not they overlap with refugees. This *is* a government that works with jihadists, rewards men who dominate, threaten and even kill women, and presides over an economy increasingly lethal to workers. Arab

and Afghan migrants present a stand-in for these crimes of the state not only for various circumstantial reasons but also for one major, symbolic one: these are people from the east.

A sense of superiority over the peoples to the east features in every version of Turkish nationalism. In the Ottoman Empire that the AKP seems so bent on reviving that its most militant youth group is called the Ottoman Hearths (*Osmanlı ocakları*), Turks ruled and Arabs were supposedly grateful. From this standpoint, the Arab revolt during World War I appears as a [betrayal](#) that could not have happened without British interference. While the Ottomans dominated the Middle East, the Kemalist republic worked to separate Turkey from it. A day before Özcan announced his plan to drive refugees out, CHP spokesman [Faik Öztrak made a speech](#) that sheds light on current Kemalist thinking. Rebutting Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's transparently culturalist claim that Turkey is the right place for Afghan refugees, Öztrak told him and Merkel, "Turkey is not and will not be Europe's migrant ghetto... How about we give *Germany* 3-5 billion dollars, and *they* can take care of these Syrian and Afghan refugees? The place the refugees want to go is not Turkey anyway, but Germany."

Öztrak began his proposals where everything begins in Turkey: the 1919-22 war of liberation (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*) under Mustafa Kemal's leadership. If Turkey is now an honored member of the community of nations, he said, it is due to the independence movement and the national project that solidified its gains. While traditionalists were lamenting the Greek defeat because it led to the secular republic putting an end to the monarchy and caliphate, he claimed, the CHP carried on the work of nation-building to which Turks owe the fact that the call to prayer still resonates from the minarets. This claim to have saved Islam is important not only as an embrace of national traditions but also to underline the hypocrisy of traditionalists whom CHP people call "merchants of religion"

(*din tüccarları*), not genuine people of faith.

From Atatürk's time onward, the Turkish state has presented itself as an emerging power seeking its rightful place among nations. For the cadres of Atatürk's state-led capitalism, that meant a formulaic adoption of western mores and institutions that would compel Europe to respect Turkey as an equal, not dominate it as a colony. As [Dağhan Irak notes](#), the determination to resemble one's erstwhile conquerors so as to be spared conquest sets one up for serious complexes. Having observed anti-refugee animus among educated, overqualified secular youth, Irak suspects that it stems from the way Europe has tightened its own eastern borders just when it insists that Turkey absorb mass migration from the east. Adrift in a stagnant economy dominated by Erdoğan's cronies, these youth see the West reject them while apparently collaborating with their government to immerse the country further in a Middle Eastern culture from which they feel alienated. Casual racism is their response.

Öztrak claims that Middle Eastern migrant workers, who may or may not be on the books, have become crucial because the AKP-run economy has room only for unskilled labor, not the intellectual labor of Turkey's educated youth. While the CHP wants to cultivate high-tech industries, Erdoğan instead oversees a low-wage economy based on rent-seeking and on corruption-prone sectors like construction, built on the backs of expendable laborers. Reviewing the declining performance of key sectors over the last decade, Öztrak concludes that while Turkey wants to compete with Europe, "meeting and surpassing" its standard of living, Turkish production has now reached a point where it can compete only with Africa.

While the picture Öztrak paints of the miserable Turkish economy has a lot of truth to it, the idea that Turkey could quickly climb global value chains if only it formed the right policies and threw off the refugee burden is dubious. It is clear that removing the AKP from power is a prerequisite to

Turkey no longer being among the ten worst countries in the world for workers, according to the [International Trade Union Confederation](#), or ranking [133rd of 156](#) in a World Economic Forum study of gender equality. It cannot be bad to replace a president who spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year [building himself kitschy palaces](#) and earmarks significant portions of the state budget for “financial” and “capital transfers” to cronies when [48% of the population of the capital city is on the verge of hunger](#). Yet fixing these problems cannot just be a matter of adjusting external dependencies while walling oneself off from neighbors who are even worse off. Such an approach amounts to setting different workers against each other, just as the government does.

The CHP discourse makes it sound like Erdoğan, agent of a comprador bourgeoisie in thrall to phony religiosity and conspicuous consumption, were simply the pawn of western powers determined to exploit Turkey by keeping it eastern. This national-developmental narrative builds on that of Turkish victory in the first successful war of national liberation fought by an underdeveloped country in the twentieth century. In some ways, the Republic of Turkey is the most successful Third World nationalist project. What it has *not* succeeded at is articulating a vision of emancipation that transcends the model of a self-identical nation surrounded by enemies. Such a vision necessarily turns on enemies within, like the minorities whose expulsion from Anatolia accompanied that of the occupying European armies in 1922.

Conclusion

Hostility to “guests” is not unique to the opposition. Some of the worst attacks on Syrians have happened in predominantly pro-government [cities](#) and [neighborhoods](#). Yet racism on the opposition presents a more pressing ideological problem. In the political sphere and in everyday conversation, several

interlocking and valid complaints about the AKP agenda, from women's rights to secularism to political economy, now find expression in a discourse centered on xenophobia. There is a danger to this discourse becoming the lingua franca of the only party remotely close to challenging AKP hegemony, and which needs to present the image of a democratic alternative to the Erdoğan nightmare. It may be idle to speculate about a future CHP-led government and fret over the prospect of Erdoğan finally falling because of anti-immigrant sentiment, of all things. Yet opposition in the present requires a minimal sense for what a better future would look like, even one far short of revolution. If traditional nationalists were to come to power on the promise of a Turkey for Turks that would quickly surpass Europe economically, they and the country would be in for a disappointment and another round of reactionary culturalist populism. Until then, the country's interlocking racisms could become even more violent.

A secular state upholding gender equality and labor rights is a good in itself, not a means of avoiding colonization by the west and corrosion from the east. The opposition should embrace democratic principles as universal principles, not as western ones. Then it might be more capable of cultivating migrants as allies against exploitation, rather than dismissing them as agents of the government's reactionary intrigues. Thinking this way could be training for the task of addressing the country's own "lumpenproletariat," particularly "informal sector" workers who, cut off from the labor movement and portions of the social wage tied to formal employment, have been an important source of AKP votes. These difficult tasks confront a Left subject to varying degrees of legal repression, but not thereby fully deprived of the means of action, as small victories like the [retreat of Erdoğan's rector-appointee at Boğaziçi University](#) demonstrate. With the government's credibility slowly eroding, now is the time for leftists and democrats to rise to these challenges—and for their comrades abroad to stress just how badly US and EU

policies help exacerbate fault lines in this part of the world.