

## MINORITY RIGHTS AND FEDERALISM IN TURKEY: Éire Nua as a Basis for Solution?

*This summer has seen an increase of revolutionary activity in Turkey. This development is a response to the growing social, political, religious and national inequality in the region. In July, the Turkish state launched its crackdown on Kurdish and revolutionary activists. The Turkish AKP-government faces a crises; Turkey is facing the possibility of re-elections in Autumn 2015. Consequently, the recent military offensive against progressive forces in Turkey is an attempt to rally the Turkey-nationalist, reactionary electorate behind the AKP and hide the government's reluctance to tackle ISIL.*

*While the Middle East is drawn into an endless spiral of violence, KAAN OSMANOGLU, by using the experiences of ÉIRE NUA, discusses solutions to replace the failed Turkish state with a democratic, federal Republic. Kaan Osmanoğlu was born in Germany and is from ethnic Laz origin. He is a long time Irish Republican and human-rights activist.*

Ireland constitutes, as the Republican Movement has always maintained, a historical national unit, despite all external attempts to divide it and establish partition as the natural political and cultural state of affairs. ÉIRE NUA reflects this unity while at the same time allowing space in the political organization of the nation for the different traditions and communities to maintain their identity and for all people to exercise real political power through its system of decentralization.

Turkey does not constitute a historic national unit in the way Ireland does. While there have for centuries been a number of political structures associated with the Turkish people in the territory that constitutes the Republic of Turkey today, its borders do not correspond to linguistic, cultural or any other natural boundaries nor to the wishes of the people, whether at the time of its founding nor today.

Rather, the present borders of Turkey are the result of an imperialist war of aggression waged by Britain, France, Russia and others and their successive restructuring of the so called Middle East according to their imperialist ambitions that also sowed the seeds for other presently failed or failing states and devastating conflicts from Iraq to Syria to Palestine. Communities longing for unity have been divided while others wishing for self-determination have been merged into structures they reject by force of arms.

At the same time, said war gave birth to the present Republic of Turkey from the debris of the former Ottoman Empire. But unlike the Irish Republic proclaimed in 1916 this republic did not herald more freedom, at least nor for minority communities, for its founders did most certainly not "cherish[...] all the children of the nation equally". Matching the oppressive political centralism and one party rule, the new leaders established an exclusive, reactionary nationalism that centered on the myth that there was one country for one people with one language.

In truth, more than 20 distinct ethnic groups with as many languages, belonging to half a dozen faiths, make up the Turkish population. The suppression of their language, culture, history and in many cases the outright denial of their existence in official documents became state policy and caused several communities to rise up in arms in the years following the establishment of the Republic. The disastrous effects of these early years are still seen and felt throughout the country and negatively affect the state and the people.

While it is unfortunately not likely, that the unjust and unnatural imperialist borders can be changed peacefully in the near future, an internal restructuring of the state according to federalist principles creating multiple regional and local centers of political decision making and thereby empowering the people while lead to a more just, more prosperous and more stable society. ÉIRE NUA provides a model example of such reorganization. While the likes of Adams and McGuinness are touring the world on behalf of their British masters to promote the failed Belfast Agreement in conflict areas from the Basque Country to Palestine and even as far as the Philippines, ÉIRE NUA receives far less attention than it deserves.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Turkey is divided into 81 provinces, which are in turn divided into districts. These units are purely of administrative importance and do not possess any meaningful political power. Province governors are appointed by the minister of the interior.

In terms of minorities, the state recognizes only three because of diplomatic obligations dating back to the aftermath of WW1: Greeks, Armenians and Jews. All other communities and traditions are denied recognition by the state. Public use of their native languages is curtailed, until very recently, it was completely forbidden.

Economic and infrastructural development is centralized and hence unresponsive to regional and local needs, the gap in development between east and west, urban and rural areas is vast.

Cultural and sectarian conflict, though less prevalent than it used to be, is still present and fostered by forces both inside and outside the country.

Pressure to assimilate and nonexistent support for minority communities leads to rapid language death and cultural desertification of the nation, those expressions of non-majority culture that are permitted are reduced to the status of folkloristic curiosities for the amusement of tourists from Europe.

### **YENİ TÜRKİYE – What could a federal Turkey look like?**

A Turkish Republic along the lines of ÉIRE NUA would preferably create a new level of administrative structure analogous to the four historic provinces of Ireland that would correspond to the geographical and cultural regions of Turkey: the European-Aegean-Mediterranean coastal regions, the Black Sea Coast, Inner Anatolia, and South-Eastern Anatolia. This would not only fit geographical and social realities but also economic ones and so enable development. In a symbolic but also administratively sensible act, Istanbul would be made capital again and awarded a special territorial status.

The present provinces would be retained as the next administrative level, but below them as outlined in ÉIRE NUA, district and community councils would give the people more control over their daily lives and the running of their affairs.

International relations, defense and similar responsibilities would be retained by the federal government, while economic development, ecology and education would be regionalized. Cultural and language matters would be handled on district or local level, closest to the people and most

suited to Turkey's complex ethnic makeup. That way, each community would be able to defend its rights and freedoms concerning use and preservation of their language, literature, arts, tradition and religious beliefs, but prevented from imposing them on others.

### **CASE STUDY: THE LAZ PEOPLE**

The Laz are a Caucasian people related to Georgians, but historically and linguistically distinct from Turks, Kurds and others. Our language is under dire threat of disappearing due to assimilation. Determined efforts are needed to save it but are not undertaken by the state. We inhabit a compact area of 5 districts in two provinces. Control over our affairs would enable us to take the necessary steps to save our language and also to sustainably develop the local economy to prevent emigration.

### **THE KURDISH QUESTION**

The people most affected by colonial and imperialist borders and political structures in the region are the Kurds. Promised a state of their own and national self-determination after WW1, they were deceived, suppressed and remain partitioned to this day. Armed struggle and regional power shifts allowed for de-facto independence to be established in Southern Kurdistan/ Northern Iraq and present developments in Syria seem to likewise lead to increased Kurdish self-determination. On the contrary, the Kurdish movement in Turkey has seemingly surrendered most of their demands; it is unclear what kind of autonomy – if any – will emerge from the present negotiations, but drawing on historical experience it is unlikely to satisfy the people's demands. Even if the present leadership settles for less, the majority of Kurds will not forego principal demands for national unification and self-determination, therefore federalism in Turkey does not hold the answer for the Kurdish question, no more than a federal Britain would have been an acceptable substitute for an Irish Republic.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the exception of the Kurdish question, which has wider regional implications and is international in character, federalism along the lines of ÉIRE NUA is the most promising if not only feasible solution for a number of pressing concerns of the people of Turkey, especially but not only minority communities.

Further, the international promotion of ÉIRE NUA and its adoption – tailored to suit individual local needs – or creation of similar concepts by movements in different parts of the world will help to highlight the appeal of ÉIRE NUA presently suppressed and provide a powerful counter narrative to the failed peace process and similar failed policies of the governments in the north and south of Ireland and their British masters that are currently portrayed as being without alternative.