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## Turkey (1984 - )

Turkey's Kurdish minority comprises between 15% and 25% of the country's population. Turkey's laws have long discriminated against the Kurds, who reside largely in the eastern region of the country. In the mid-1980s, the conflict and repression grew more violent, as a guerrilla group called the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) began a terror campaign that targeted government and economic installations and Kurds accused of being "collaborators" with the government. Violence has diminished somewhat since 1999, when PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, also known as "Apo," was arrested.

Turkish independence in 1923 ushered in new policies of Turkification. The Kurdish language was outlawed and Kurdish publishing banned. The government denied the very existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group, imprisoning politicians, academics, and intellectuals who acknowledged the Kurdish ethnic identity. Education instilled a Turkish identity. The eastern region had fewer health services, and largely missed out on industrial and agricultural advances. By the late 1950s, Kurdish groups began to organize to defend their interests, but mass arrests took place in 1959, and military coups in 1960 and again in 1971 brought increasingly brutal repression. After another military coup in 1980, the government declared martial law in Kurdish areas.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was founded in the late 1970s, and became active in 1984 under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan. PKK fighters killed hundreds of civilians in the first years of their campaign, accusing them of collaborating with the Turkish government. Threatened by the loss of popular support, the PKK changed tactics in 1988, hitting economic targets rather than civilians. However, it continued to burn schools and kill teachers, who they accused of destroying Kurdish identity. In the early 1990s, under a new anti-terrorism act and having amassed a large security force in the east, the government moved to decisively crush the PKK. The military destroyed villages, burned crops and forests, and displaced as many as one million people. The conflict has killed an estimated 35,000 people, the vast majority them Kurdish civilians.

With Ocalan's arrest in 1999, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire. Ocalan was initially sentenced to death, but the government, in the course of its efforts to join the European Union, outlawed the death penalty in 2002, and commuted his sentence to life in prison. Although the scale of the violence has diminished since 1999, sporadic fighting continues, notwithstanding efforts to achieve a ceasefire.

### *Print Resources*

Chaliand, Gerard (1992) *The Kurdish Tragedy*. London: Zed Books and the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development.

Kirişçi, Kemal and Gareth M. Winrow (1997) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: An Example of the Trans-State Ethnic Conflict*. London: Frank Cass.

Barkey, Henri and Graham Fuller (1998) *Turkey's Kurdish Question*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Yildiz, Kerim (2005) *The Kurds in Turkey: EU Accession and Human Rights*. London: Pluto Press.

### *Online Resources*

BBC News. *Country Profile: Turkey.*

Minorities at Risk. *Assessment for Kurds in Turkey.*

Human Rights Watch. *Turkey.*

### *Timeline*

1978 - PKK forms

1980 - coup overthrows Turkish government; PKK establishes base in Syria

1983 - PKK allies with Iraqi KDP and moves bases to Iraq

1984 - PKK launches guerilla war from northern Iraq

1987 - KDP withdraws support for PKK because of high civilian casualties

1988 - PKK alters tactics to strike economic targets

1991 - Turkey passes anti-terror law, cracks down on Kurds

1993 - PKK forms alternative government in eastern Turkey

1994 - Turkish military given full power to crush PKK

1995 - negotiations between government and PKK break down

1999 - PKK leader Ocalan arrested in Kenya; PKK declares unilateral ceasefire

2004 - PKK ends ceasefire

2006 - PKK unilaterally announces another ceasefire, but clashes continue