

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	381
Land:	Tyrkiet
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group
Titel:	State of the world's minorities and indigenous peoples 2015 – case study: little change, two decades on, for Turkey's displaced Kurds
Udgivet:	2. juli 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	30. september 2015



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Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication
Date 2 July 2015

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Case study: Little change, two decades on, for Turkey's displaced Kurds*, 2 July 2015, available at:
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/55a4fa2e31.html> [accessed 8 September 2015]

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by *Bill Bowring*

Turkey's Kurdish community, besides being the largest minority in the country, is also one of the most discriminated against. Historically, Kurds are concentrated in the eastern and south-western parts of the country. Their situation deteriorated further following the outbreak of fighting in 1984 between the government and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), an armed opposition group fighting for self-determination. Increasing violence on both sides resulted in the displacement of millions of civilians.

A major factor in Turkey's rapid urbanization in recent decades, especially the main cities in south-eastern Turkey, was the policy of village destruction, which was central to Turkey's internal conflict against the PKK. By 1994, at least 3,000 villages had been deliberately destroyed as part of this campaign. The European Court of Human Rights gave judgment in a number of cases and established that Turkey had destroyed many villages as part of a military strategy. In this context, urban centres such as Diyarbakır experienced rapid growth, tripling in size during the 1990s even as many residents themselves moved elsewhere in Turkey or abroad to escape the violence.

Though there is no consensus on how many exactly were displaced, reliable estimates range between 1 and 3 million. This legacy of displacement persists today, with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimating there to be at least 953,700 Kurdish internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Turkey as of December 2014 – the majority of them those who were originally uprooted by fighting between 1986 and 1995. IDMC reports that most have had to survive without external support, either in urban areas in relative proximity to their home villages or in cities in other regions of the country, often in low quality housing.

Though the government has reportedly undertaken periodic attempts to support return, through village rehabilitation and compensation for those displaced, as well as payments to those affected by the 2013 conflict, IDMC reports that as of 2009 only 187,000 IDPs had returned. However, the political will to implement these changes has been questioned given that conditions in former villages often make return unfeasible, with little in the way of basic services or livelihood options.

Some areas still reportedly contained landmines. With hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring Syria now settled in the country, the prospects of a speedy resolution are even slimmer.

Those who have migrated out of the main Kurdish-populated areas to western Turkish cities face other challenges. A 2012 study for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada included interviews with local researchers who described the 'atmosphere of pressure' and the 'nationalist backlash' that the Kurdish minority often experienced when in western Turkish cities. This poses significant challenges for their long-term integration and well-being. A large portion of Istanbul's Kurdish population, for example, having been displaced during the conflict, were forced to move to the periphery of the city to live in areas with low rents or weak regulations where they could settle illegally. Many today are still living in neighbourhoods such as Karayollari, a spatially segregated neighbourhood that continues to struggle with high levels of unemployment and crime.

Kurdish communities in Istanbul are facing new challenges, including gentrification. In one high-profile case, Kurds and Roma residents were evicted from informal settlements in Karayollari in order to make way for Avrupa Konutlari, an up-scale gated community comprising numerous high-rise buildings around a large swimming pool and aimed at middle-class commuters. Kurds living nearby have told journalists that they see the buildings as a provocation, while some admit that they welcome the job opportunities which the construction industry provides.

At the same time, some commentators have highlighted that internal migration, even in difficult circumstances, can contribute to cohesion and also bring benefits to Kurds and other marginalized groups in terms of greater life opportunities. Though studies on displaced households have highlighted the continued longing for return among many of those displaced more than two decades ago, it is likely that others will remain in their new locations. As the country attempts to move towards lasting peace, support for those wishing to return and more targeted urban strategies to encourage the development and inclusion of Kurdish communities in urban areas will be essential.

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