Part II: A New Republic

Immediately after the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal—who would later take the name Atatürk (which means “father of the Turks”)—began a dramatic transformation of Turkish society.

In the following pages, you will read about Atatürk’s sweeping reforms and efforts to create a modern, unified, and secular (non-religious) country out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. You will explore the emergence of a multiparty democracy in the 1950s, and periods of social and economic turmoil followed by three military coups in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. You will also examine the Kurdish conflict, which has claimed over forty thousand lives in Turkey.

Atatürk’s Reforms

In October 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk became the first president of the Turkish Republic. Atatürk was convinced that Turkey had to break from its Ottoman past in order to become a prosperous, thriving, and modern country. Atatürk carried out radical reforms to forge a new government and national identity.

What were Atatürk’s goals for the new republic?

Atatürk wanted to create a new national identity in which people saw themselves as Turkish citizens instead of subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk’s reforms changed the political and legal systems, but also led to broad social changes in education, language, and religion.

“The name Turk, as a political term, shall be understood to include all citizens of the Turkish Republic, without distinction of, or reference to, race or religion.”
—Turkish Constitution of 1924, article 88

In March 1924, Atatürk abolished the caliphate (caliph was the title given to the religious leader of the Islamic world, which had for centuries been held by the Ottoman sultan) and demanded that all members of the Ottoman dynasty leave the country. In April, Turkey adopted a new constitution.

Atatürk was determined to make Turkey more like a European country. The government abolished religious courts, and by 1926, Turkey had adopted a secular legal system. Turkey created a civil code modeled on that of Switzerland, a penal code based on that of Italy, and a commercial code based on those of Italy and Germany.

In the new republic, citizens elected the parliament, known as the Grand National Assembly. The parliament elected the president, and the president appointed the prime minister. For decades to come, the country would be governed by a single party under Atatürk’s leadership, the Republican People’s Party, or Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP).

Despite Atatürk’s charisma and popularity, some citizens of the new republic disagreed with his reforms. The government used a range of tactics to silence those who opposed its policies, from restrictive laws and powerful courts to the deployment of the military to crush rebellions.

How did Atatürk change the relationship between the government and religious institutions?

Atatürk wanted to prevent religion from being the basis of the new country’s political system. He believed that the government and its laws should be completely secular, with no religious influence. But while Atatürk believed that religion should be kept out of politics, he did not want the government to stay out of religion.

The late Ottoman Empire had made the education and legal systems more secular and increased government control over religious affairs, but Atatürk took this trend to a new level. In addition to dissolving the caliphate...
in 1924, the Turkish government took steps to eliminate the influence of other religious leaders and shut down religious schools and hospitals. In 1925, Turkey amended its High Treason Law to make the political use of religion a crime.

The government also created the Directorate of Religious Affairs, or the Diyanet. The Diyanet, which exists to this day, brought religion under state control. This government office appointed and paid the salaries of imams (Islamic leaders) and other religious figures. The Diyanet oversaw the distribution of religious sermons in the country and provided schools with approved texts to teach religion. In 1928, the government stripped the clause from the constitution that proclaimed Islam to be the official religion of Turkey, and in 1937, secularism was added to the constitution as a guiding principle of the republic.

While many people embraced Atatürk’s changes, others felt disappointed and betrayed by the new policies. Atatürk’s religious reforms were not only unpopular with some—particularly in the countryside—they also came as a surprise. For example, during the War of Independence, Atatürk rallied much of Anatolia’s population by proclaiming that the independence struggle would preserve the sultanate and caliphate—positions that he later abolished.

What cultural and political reforms were enacted?

In addition to modeling parts of the Turkish government after European governments, Atatürk took steps to make Turkish society more like Western countries. For example, women were discouraged from the Islamic practice of veiling, and women working in state institutions were prohibited from wearing a headscarf. In November 1925, the government instituted a hat reform for men. This new policy banned wearing the turban or the fez, a red felt hat common in the Ottoman Empire. It also required government employees to wear a European-style hat. The hat reform created an uproar, and Atatürk used the courts to try opponents of this and other policies.

A group of Turkish students and teachers in 1923. Many are wearing a fez, a hat commonly worn during the Ottoman era. Two years after this photograph was taken, Atatürk banned the fez.
In the mid-1920s, Turkey adopted the international clock and the European calendar, dropping the Ottoman religious and solar calendars. In 1934, the government proclaimed that all Turks must adopt a family name, and all traditional titles were abolished, such as “bey” (chief), “effendi” (sir/lord), and “hanım” (Mrs.). In 1935, Turkey switched the weekly holiday from Friday, the Islamic holy day, to Sunday.

Atatürk also championed the rights of women to participate more fully in society. He granted women the right to vote and run for office at the municipal level in 1930 and at the national level in 1934. (This was before women achieved these rights in France, Switzerland, and many other countries.) In 1935, eighteen women were elected to the Grand National Assembly. Despite these legal reforms, women still faced long-held traditional views in society on the role of women.

How did Atatürk change the Turkish language?

In 1928, Atatürk announced that Turkey would adopt a new alphabet. Ottoman Turkish had been written in Arabic script and for centuries had included many words of Persian and Arabic origin. Atatürk demanded that a new alphabet based on Latin letters be used and sought to purge the language of “foreign” vocabulary by replacing some of these words with words of Turkish origin. European-style numbers were also introduced.

“[O]ur rich and harmonious language will now be able to display itself with new Turkish letters. We must free ourselves from these incomprehensible signs, that for centuries have held our minds in an iron vice. You must learn the new Turkish letters quickly.”

—Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, August 1928

These swift changes created disorder, as many people had difficulty understanding newspaper articles and government documents. But the government sent thousands of young teachers to villages throughout the

**Kurds in the Republic**

Atatürk’s government denied that Kurds existed as a distinct ethnic group within the new republic. It banned the teaching of the Kurdish language, as well as its use in schools, in print publications, and in public. The government renamed Kurdish cities and towns with Turkish names and removed references to the region of “Kurdistan” on maps and government documents. These policies shocked Kurds who had been promised autonomy by Atatürk during the War of Independence. It became clear that Atatürk had little interest in granting the Kurds autonomy or independence.

In February 1925, Kurds began a rebellion in eastern Turkey. Participants had varied goals, from the restoration of religious law and the caliphate to greater autonomy and self-rule. In response, the Turkish military swept through Kurdish regions, burning villages, seizing livestock, and massacring thousands. The government forced over twenty thousand Kurds, many of whom had not been involved in the rebellion, to relocate to western Turkey. Although the rebellion was crushed, Kurdish uprisings and resistance continued under Atatürk’s rule, as did harsh government responses.

In 1934, Turkey passed the Settlement Act. This law created geographic zones and outlined a policy of resettling residents to promote “Turkish culture.” Although the law did not explicitly refer to Kurds, it was widely used to uproot Kurds who were concentrated in eastern Turkey. Villages in which Turkish was not the mother language were disbanded, and their residents moved to predominantly Turkish-speaking areas. The forced relocation of minority ethnic groups was not new, but the law provided the legal basis for the expansion of this practice.
country to teach the new alphabet. At this time, the vast majority of the population was illiterate. The new Turkish alphabet more closely matched the sounds of the Turkish language, making it easier for Turkish speakers to learn to read and write.

Atatürk also prohibited Arabic and Persian classes and banned Kurdish from being spoken in public. In 1932, he required that Turkish be used during the Islamic call to prayer, instead of Arabic.

How did the CHP maintain a tight grasp on its power?

Atatürk’s revolutionary reforms were what he believed were necessary for Turkey to become a modern and prosperous country. He used his power and popularity to persuade the population and push reforms through, and did not shy away from suppressing those who opposed his plans.

Although Atatürk spoke about democracy, the republic was an authoritarian one-party system. The CHP controlled the government, and the Grand National Assembly reelected Atatürk in 1927, 1931, and 1935.

On two occasions (1924 and 1930), Atatürk allowed the formation of other political parties. Neither party lasted more than a few months before being dissolved by the CHP.

“For the people, despite the people.”

—Motto of the CHP in the early 1930s

In addition to banning opposition parties, the CHP used a variety of measures to silence its critics. Independence Tribunals tried members of the opposition, and those who were arrested were often denied access to lawyers. When the tribunals were closed in 1927, Turkish authorities had arrested over seven thousand people and handed down over six hundred death sentences.

The CHP frequently shut down newspapers and brought journalists to trial if they questioned government policies. In 1933, the government purged universities of professors who were critical of the ruling party, an act that the government would carry out repeatedly in the coming decades. In 1936, the
government seized control of all private radio stations.

**What was life like in Turkey during the early years of the republic?**

The early republic focused mainly on its domestic economic development and recovery from World War I and the War of Independence. The human toll of these conflicts was great. Between 1914 and 1927, the population within the region had declined from 16.3 million to 13.6 million. The loss of male adults during the wars had a significant negative effect on the economy. Literacy levels were also low; only 11 percent could read or write in 1927. In 1924, Turkey had about one thousand doctors. Life expectancy was low and averaged only thirty-eight years by 1950.

Turkey was a largely agrarian society, and agricultural production had plummeted during wartime as farmers left for battle and crops and livestock perished. During the first few years after independence, agriculture rebounded quickly. Nearly 80 percent of Turkey’s working population lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture, in part because it was a way to ensure they had access to food.

The Turkish government sought to move toward a more industrial economy. It took back control of industries that had been managed by European countries during Ottoman rule, for example, the railroad system and the tobacco industry. The government also began programs to strengthen the education system.

The Great Depression, a severe global economic crisis, struck Turkey hard in the 1930s. Like other countries worldwide, the Turkish government responded by nationalizing, or taking ownership of, major industries and businesses. State-owned companies producing iron, steel, textiles, telegraph and telephone systems, and other goods and services employed Turkish workers. The government placed a high tax on foreign goods to shield Turkish businesses from competition and encourage people to buy goods produced within the country.
What was Turkey’s foreign policy following independence?

Turkey’s foreign policy was cautious under Atatürk. Atatürk wanted to focus on developing Turkey’s economy and to avoid creating any impression that he planned to rebuild the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the Turkish government sought to avoid foreign conflict and wanted good relationships with its neighbors, including the Soviet Union. For most of World War II, Turkey devoted its diplomatic efforts to staying out of the fighting. In February 1945, Turkey declared war on Nazi Germany, in part because doing so made it eligible to become a founding member of the United Nations (UN).

Democratic Change

At the end of World War II, the public began to demand a greater voice in politics. In January 1946, the government allowed the Democrat Party (DP) to form as an opposition party. The DP was a more religious party that drew support primarily from rural areas. The CHP was startled by the DP’s popularity throughout the country.

The CHP rigged the 1946 elections, limiting the DP’s success at the polls. The fraudulent elections caused a public outcry, and hostility between the parties soared. President İsmet İnönü—the first president to serve following Atatürk’s death in 1938—intervened. He reiterated his support for a multiparty system and called for cooperation between the opposition and those in power.

“The result I seek is the institution of confidence between the parties. This is necessary for the security of the country. The opposition will work without fear of being closed down by the party in power; the government will be secure that the opposition demands nothing beyond its legal rights; the citizens will be confident in seeking the possibility of the transfer of power from one party to another. ...I ask for genuine cooperation between the leaders of the opposition and government parties.”

—President İsmet İnönü, July 12, 1947

When did Turkey have its first free and fair multiparty elections?

In the elections of 1950, the Democrat Party achieved a landslide victory. It won 54
percent of the vote and 408 seats in parliament, while the former ruling party, the CHP, won just under 40 percent of the vote and gained only 69 seats. These were the first free and fair multiparty elections in Turkey’s history. After twenty-seven years in power, the CHP respected the result of the elections and peacefully transferred power to the opposition.

“Enough! Now the people have their say.”
—Slogan of the Democrat Party, victor of the 1950 elections

How did the Cold War affect Turkey?
While there was pressure from within Turkey for democratic reform, developments in the international community also had important effects on Turkey’s political transformation and its relationship to the world.

After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union began a global struggle for power and influence known as the Cold War that lasted for forty years. The United States adopted a policy of containing the spread of Soviet communism around the world. Turkey played an important role in the opening chapter of the U.S. struggle against the Soviet Union.

U.S. President Harry S. Truman (1945-53) was concerned about Soviet influence in Greece and Turkey. The Greek government was embroiled in a civil war against the Greek Communist Party, and the United States feared Soviet involvement. Truman was also worried that the Soviet Union might invade Turkey. The Soviets had demanded military bases in the Turkish straits and wanted control over territory in eastern Turkey. (Turkey shared a land border with the Soviet Union, and the two countries faced each other across the Black Sea.)

In 1947, Truman asked the U.S. Congress to commit $400 million in aid to Turkey and Greece. Truman also announced that the United States would oppose “the subjugation of free peoples” anywhere in the world, not
just Turkey and Greece. This would become known as the Truman Doctrine.

“The future of Turkey as an independent and economically sound state is clearly no less important to the freedom-loving peoples of the world than the future of Greece…. Turkey now needs our support.”
—U.S. President Harry S. Truman, March 12, 1947

Turkey also received aid through another U.S. foreign aid program, known as the Marshall Plan. In March 1948, Congress approved funding to help European countries recover from the devastation of World War II. U.S. policy makers believed strengthening the economies of Europe, including Turkey, would be the best way to fend off Soviet attempts to dominate the region.

How did Turkey’s foreign policy align with the United States and Western Europe?

In addition to receiving aid from the United States after World War II, Turkey took additional steps to align itself with the United States and Western Europe. Turkey was a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, and in 1947 joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It also sought membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance forged in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to defend against Soviet aggression. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Turkey was one of the first countries to announce that it would commit troops to UN forces in the country. This helped Turkey gain admission to NATO in 1952.

During the 1950s, the United States and NATO expanded their military bases in Turkey. These bases were of great strategic importance to the United States and NATO because of their close proximity to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey’s foreign policy remained closely aligned with that of the United States.

What changes did Turkey experience in the 1950s?

In 1950, over 77 percent of the population worked in agriculture. The Democrat Party distributed state land for farming and used funds from the Marshall Plan to buy tractors. These changes, along with good weather and growing conditions, led to increased agricultural productivity in the early 1950s. A drought in the mid-1950s made life challenging for farmers, and many moved to urban areas in search of jobs in factories. Turks also began migrating to Europe, particularly to Germany, in search of employment—a trend that would accelerate during the 1960s and 1970s.

The DP also built roads that connected rural areas to cities. Some newcomers to cities set up makeshift houses on the outskirts of town, called gecekondus, which means “built in a night.” Many of these settlements lacked access to sewers, clean water, and electricity. By the end of the 1950s, cities and towns were growing at a rate of 10 percent a year.

The DP also allowed religion to play a more visible role in public life. It opened new religious schools, permitted the call to prayer in Arabic again (instead of Turkish), and allowed thousands of mosques to reopen.

Political Upheaval

Between 1948 and 1965, the United States provided $2.5 billion in military aid to Turkey and an additional $1.5 billion in economic aid. The military became increasingly important and powerful in society. Turkish military officers were highly trained and educated. They saw themselves as protectors of the republic against external threats. As Turkey entered the 1960s, military leaders turned their attention to what they believed were internal challenges to Atatürk’s legacy and the republic.

Why did the Turkish military seize control of the government in 1960?

Toward the end of the 1950s, the Democrat Party had become increasingly unpopular. Worsening economic conditions fueled public discontent and the DP became more authoritarian.
In May 1960, a small group of military officers took control of the country in a coup d’état. The military feared that the DP was straying from secularism and that the authoritarian measures the party used to govern would lead to further instability. The military was also concerned that Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was seeking closer ties with the Soviet Union, the Cold War rival of Turkey’s NATO allies.

In Ankara and Istanbul, where the government had been particularly unpopular, many Turks celebrated the news of the coup. The military dissolved the Democrat Party and arrested hundreds of its members. Prime Minister Menderes, his foreign minister, and his finance minister were sent to the gallows and executed.

After the coup, there was a division within the military. Some officers wanted the military to maintain control of the country. But the majority believed that they should not play an extended role in politics and that power should be handed back to civilians. Many agreed that more than just a change in political leadership was necessary, and that Turkey should draft a new constitution.

What were the legacies of the 1960 coup?

In 1961, the military put into place a new constitution. The constitution added a second chamber (called the senate) to the legislature, created a broader system of checks and balances, and included a bill of civil liberties that expanded the rights of Turkish citizens. In contrast to the constitution of 1924, the 1961 constitution called for multiple political parties and provided protections for opposition groups. The new constitution broke the tradition of single-party rule and strengthened Turkey’s multiparty democracy, a system that exists to this day.
The constitution also carved out a larger role for the military in government policy making. A new National Security Council—which was led by the president and included the prime minister and leaders of the army, navy, air force, and national police—allowed the military to advise the government on matters of domestic and international security. Over the course of the following decades, the military would use this council to expand its influence over government policy.

The 1960 coup had lasting effects on Turkey. Not only did it drastically reshape the country’s constitution and government, but it also created a precedent of military involvement in politics. The coup established a reputation for the military in the eyes of the people as a guardian of the republic. The coming decades would be marked by political and social turmoil, and the military would intervene directly in politics multiple times. After each intervention, the military returned control to a civilian government.

Why did the military intervene in politics in 1971?

Following the elections of 1961, the military handed over control to a civilian government. The new constitution and return to civilian rule created a more open political climate. With new protections for a multiparty system, a wide range of political parties attempted to participate in government. (Some religious parties were shut down for violating the secular provisions of the constitution.) At the same time, violent clashes occurred between nationalist groups on the right and socialist and communist parties on the left. An economic downturn in the late 1960s added to growing turmoil. Workers staged protests to voice their concerns. Violence plagued the streets and university campuses.

In 1971, the military stepped in and carried out a second coup. One of its main goals was to subdue the political violence. Unlike the 1960 coup, the military did not eject the government from power or take direct control, but left politicians in office and closely guided the policies of the country. It amended the constitution to expand the president’s power and limited civil liberties and free speech. The military strengthened the role of the National Security Council and set up State Security Courts with military judges.

The military declared martial law in several provinces. Cold War concerns about communism led the military to wage a “counter-guerilla” campaign against leftist and communist groups. The military handed control back to elected politicians in 1973, but the political and social upheaval intensified throughout the rest of the decade.

Why did the military take full control of the country again in 1980?

Similar to the 1960s, the 1970s was a period of political instability. Turkey changed prime ministers eleven times, and the government struggled to respond to political divisions that became increasingly violent. Bombings and shootings were commonplace, particularly on university campuses, in the slums of Ankara and Istanbul, and in Kurdish regions in the East.

Economic issues were a major contributor to the unrest. The global economic recession of the 1970s struck Turkey hard. Unemployment soared, and many recent college graduates could not find work. In the late 1970s, inflation surged. In 1979, the price of oil more than doubled, and energy shortages affected the daily lives of people throughout Turkey.

Political disagreements prevented the Grand National Assembly from dealing with the economic issues facing Turkey. In 1980, the Assembly was unable to elect a president after 115 attempts at voting. The government was paralyzed and unable to maintain law and order; the country teetered on the verge of economic collapse.

On September 12, 1980, the military staged its third coup in two decades. The military announced that it was taking control because the government was incapable of ruling the country. At the time of the coup, dozens of civilians were being killed each day in street violence, and the death toll of the prior year surpassed two thousand.
**How did the military exert its control over the country?**

The military dissolved the parliament, removed mayors and other political leaders from office, and banned the existing political parties. Within the first year of military rule, over one hundred thousand people were arrested, from politicians and lawyers to teachers and journalists.

The military targeted those it suspected of committing violence or terrorism. Torture was widely used against those who were detained and interrogated. Hundreds died while detained, and dozens were executed. Many were “disappeared” or exiled. The military took additional steps to freeze political activity. Many people were arrested or fired from their jobs because they expressed communist opinions. The military shut down newspapers, and in June 1981, it banned all public political discussions and organizing.

Much of the public felt a general sense of relief when the military took control. The military intervention effectively brought an end to the street violence that had plagued the country for years. At the same time, the military’s violent and antidemocratic tactics deeply troubled many.

**Why did the military change Turkey’s constitution?**

Many military leaders blamed the 1961 constitution for Turkey’s social and political turmoil. They believed that for the government to be effective and maintain law and order, its authority had to be strengthened. The military appointed a committee to draft a new constitution. In November 1982, all citizens were required to vote in a nationwide ballot on the proposed constitution, but the military banned all criticism of it prior to the vote. Over 90 percent of voters voted in favor of the constitution.

The constitution abolished the senate (returning Turkey to a unicameral legislature) and expanded the power of the president, giving the president the right to dissolve the Assembly. It included a provision that General Evren, the military leader who had led the country during the period of military rule, would automatically serve one seven-year term as president. The new constitution strengthened the role of the National Security Council, which granted more power to the military to exercise control over government policy. It also rolled back many of the rights and liberties that the previous constitution had granted Turkish citizens. For example, political activity based on class, religious sect, language, or race was prohibited. This was intended to limit the activities of Kurdish nationalists, communists, and Islamist groups (groups that wanted Islam to influence society and the law). New political parties could only be formed with the approval of the National Security Council.

**How did the military hand power back to a civilian government?**

For the third time since 1960, the military relinquished control of the government and allowed three parties to compete in elections in November 1983. The party most closely linked with the military received the smallest percentage of votes. The Motherland Party, led by Turgut Özal, won a solid victory at the polls, despite the fact that the military had discouraged voters from supporting this party. Prime Minister Özal played the most important role in the government, but the military retained power in the years to come through its role in the National Security Council and through its temporary hold on the presidency—General Evren remained president until 1989.

**The Kurdish Conflict**

Throughout Turkey’s history, government leaders, including Atatürk, have viewed Kurdish nationalism as a threat to the unity of the republic. The government has enacted policies and laws to suppress Kurdish nationalism. Several of these laws were passed during periods of military rule.

**What types of policies did the military enact after the three coups?**

Following all three coups, the military
Kurds make up about 20 percent of Turkey's population with concentrations in eastern and southeastern regions. Significant Kurdish populations also live in the neighboring countries of Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria.

passed a range of harsh measures against Kurds. For example, after the 1960 coup, parents were banned from giving their children Kurdish names. The political and cultural repression of Kurds reached new levels after the 1980 coup. Speaking or publishing materials in Kurdish was seen by the military as an act of resistance.

“\textit{It is forbidden to use as a mother tongue any language other than Turkish and to carry, at public gatherings and assemblies, placards, banners, signs, boards, posters and the like, written in a language other than Turkish.}”

—Law 2932, October 1983

\textbf{How did Kurdish resistance take shape?}

In the early 1960s, Kurds increasingly took to the streets to protest their treatment. Activists argued that Kurds had participated in the War of Independence, but decades later, had still not been granted the same rights as other citizens.

“We will not be daunted, we will not be intimidated. We will contend until the end for the realization of our constitutional rights in full. When we achieve our rights we gain dignity and self respect.... Being Kurdish is not a crime.”

—Mehmet Sözer, Kurdish activist, August 24, 1969

The government banned all known Kurdish political parties, and political leaders often faced arrest and brutality. In spite of this repression, Kurdish political organizing continued, often in secret, in the 1970s and 1980s.

\textbf{What led to the creation of the militant Kurdish political group called the PKK?}

The government’s repression of Kurdish political activism led to the creation of a group called the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, or Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan (PKK) in 1978. The PKK’s founder Abdullah Öcalan wanted to create an independent, communist state for Kurds in southeastern Turkey. In 1984, the PKK
launched an armed rebellion against the Turkish government.

The PKK’s insurgency attracted thousands of supporters who used guns, grenades, and landmines to attack government sites, police, and Kurds who collaborated with the government.

In towns where the PKK seized control, it set up its own administration separate from the Turkish government, held trials outside of the official court system, and collected taxes from businesses to fund its operations. It also funded its activities through illegal smuggling of heroin and weapons and from the financial support of Kurdish populations living outside of Turkey. The PKK had bases and guerilla training camps in several neighboring countries, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran.

How did the government respond to the PKK?

The Turkish military carried out “scorched earth” campaigns in thousands of Kurdish villages—evacuating and destroying towns, killing livestock, and setting fire to fields and homes. As soldiers swept through towns, they rounded up and arrested residents. They often made little distinction between the insurgents and civilians they considered to be sympathizers of the PKK. Turkish forces frequently beat and tortured those in custody to elicit confessions of supporting the PKK.

The conflict strained relations between the Turkish government and its neighbors, especially those with Kurdish populations of their own. Tensions ran high with Syria, which provided a safe haven for Öcalan and allowed PKK bases within its territory. On several occasions, the Turkish government launched attacks against PKK bases in northern Iraq.

The Anti-Terror Law

Many of the actions of the PKK during the civil war fell under international definitions of terrorism. As of 2016, the European Union, NATO, Turkey, the United States, and several other countries continue to classify the PKK as a terrorist organization.

In 1991, as the war in the East ramped up, the Turkish parliament passed the Anti-Terror Law. It defined terrorism broadly, and although it did not explicitly address the Kurdish conflict, its focus on acts “damaging the indivisible unity of the state” could easily be applied to Kurdish separatists. In addition to criminalizing violent terrorist acts, the law also placed limitations on certain types of writing, speech, and gatherings.

The Anti-Terror Law opened the door for authorities to prosecute not only PKK militants, but also many citizens who did not participate directly in the conflict. For example, the state prosecuted for “terrorist activity” several professors and journalists who denounced government involvement in Kurdish regions, as well as activists that pressed for cultural rights for Kurds. In effect, the law criminalized things such as discussion of the PKK, criticism of the government’s human rights abuses, or writing about Kurdish identity.

“During 1992, scores of journalists, editors and writers were beaten, interrogated, tortured, charged, tried and sometimes convicted for what they had written, edited or published in Turkey. Most were charged under the very broad Anti-Terror Law for such offenses as ‘criticizing’ or ‘insulting’ the president, public officers, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or the military;...‘praising a terrorist organization’; or spreading ‘separatist propaganda.’”

—Human Rights Watch, 1993 World Report

The Anti-Terror Law exists to this day. Although it has been amended, it continues to stir controversy. Critics claim that the government uses the law to silence opposition within Turkey.
**How did Kurdish civilians respond to the conflict?**

Not all Kurds supported the PKK. Sixty-five thousand Kurds worked for the government as “village guards” to fight the PKK insurgency.

Others sympathized with or joined the PKK, frustrated by years of political oppression and economic hardship and angered by the government’s brutal tactics.

Still others felt trapped in the middle of the conflict—neither the PKK nor the Turkish government ensured their safety. In many cases, bystanders were threatened and forced to join a side. Hundreds of thousands of civilians fled their villages, and large numbers migrated to other cities within Turkey (such as Adana, Diyarbakır, İzmir, and Istanbul) and abroad.

Although the Turkish government described the conflict with the PKK as simply the “southeastern problem,” in fact, Turkey had descended into civil war.

**Why did the civil war wind down?**

By the early 1990s, the Turkish military had committed a quarter of a million troops to the conflict. At the same time, the PKK’s goals started to shift. Moving away from the objective of a separate Kurdish state, the PKK focused on obtaining greater autonomy and rights for Kurds within Turkey.

Turkish forces captured Öcalan in Kenya in February 1999, after he had fled from Syria to Greece, and then to Italy. Some suspect that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency played a role in his capture. Öcalan was tried and found guilty of treason. From his prison cell, he called for PKK insurgents to retreat from Turkey and to begin the process of reconciliation.

> “The democratic option is the only alternative to solving the Kurdish question. Separation is neither possible nor necessary. We want peace, dialogue, and free political action within the framework of a democratic Turkish state.”
> —Abdullah Öcalan, during his 1999 trial

In August 1999, the PKK declared a cease-fire and started to withdraw its forces across Turkey, many retreating to bases in Iraq. Tensions between the PKK and the government exist to this day, and violence continues.

**What have been the costs of the Kurdish conflict?**

The greatest cost of the Kurdish conflict has been the tremendous loss of human life—over forty thousand people—and the displacement, violence, and trauma experienced by many more. The conflict also damaged the economy; agriculture suffered and tourism plummeted. By end of the 1990s, the Turkish military was spending $10 billion on the conflict each year.

The conflict also heightened tensions with Turkey’s neighbors and with Europe. For example, the European Union (EU) voiced criticism of Turkey’s human rights record. Beginning in 1996, the European Court of Human Rights found Turkey guilty of a range of offenses, from torture to unlawful killings. The Kurdish conflict presented an obstacle to Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union. To this day, Kurdish families are seeking justice for the disappearances, deaths, and torture of their loved ones.