

The Return to Village : Turkey's state building in Kurdistan

A Hundred Years Of Republican Turkey

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The Return to the Village: Turkey's State-Building in Kurdistan

Joost Jongerden

As part of its counter-insurgency strategy to reclaim the countryside in southeast Anatolia from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), the Turkish Armed Forces evacuated and destroyed rural settlements on a massive scale in the 1990s. According to official figures, 833 villages and 2,382 small rural settlements, totalling 3,215 settlements, were evacuated and destroyed in fourteen provinces in the east and southeast, namely in Adıyaman, Ağrı, Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van. Of the approximately 12,000 rural settlements that were in existence, that makes about 25% of the total. According to various estimates, the evacuations displaced between 1 and 4 million rural inhabitants.

Several plans for resettlement or the controlled rural return of Kurdish villagers had already been made and discussed when the evacuations took place. It took until 2001, however, for a comprehensive plan to be released, one that, as it turned out, was more concerned about the settlement structure than with the forced migrants. That was the East and Southeast Anatolia Region Village Return and Rehabilitation Project Sub-region Development Plan (*Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Köye Dönüş ve Rehabilitasyon Projesi Alt Bölge Gelişme Planı*) coordinated by the Regional Development Administration of the Southeast Anatolia Project (*Bölge Kalkınma İdaresi – Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, BKİ-GAP) and guided by a steering committee comprised of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the (twelve) governors of the war-affected provinces included in the study, the State Planning Organisation (*Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı*, DPT), and the General Directorate of Rural Services (*Köy Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü*).

The research for the study was carried out under the auspices of Prof Dr Oğuz Oyan (1947–), then president of the Turkish Social Sciences Association (Türk Sosyal Bilimler Derneği, TSBD) and vice-president of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), and Prof Dr Melih Ersoy (1948–), a professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in the Faculty of Architecture at Middle East Technical University (Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, ODTÜ) in Ankara. Interviews were conducted with governors, deputy-governors, district officers, and mayors, and focus group interviews took place with villagers from 297 villages in eleven of the war-affected provinces (Batman, Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van) involving 1,097 people (most of them displaced villagers). The villages were selected from three different lists provided by national, regional, and provincial authorities (the government, the GAP, and governors) and nominated as potential

locations either for concentrated settlements or for the provision of central functions for surrounding villages.

The resulting publication, *The East and Southeast Anatolia Region Village Return and Rehabilitation Project Sub-Region Development Plan*, consists of twelve volumes, one for each (war-affected) province (in alphabetical order Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van). Each report consists of four parts. The first part, which is identical for each report, is entitled “Definition and Scope of the Return to Village and Rehabilitation Sub-Region Plan” and explicates the conceptual framework. The second part gives the results of the focus group interviews, which include quantitative information on pre- and post-migration work and income, and qualitative information about opinions concerning the process of returning to the villages, the support expected, and ideas about the post-return reality. The third part, which is the most extensive (covering almost half of each report, which varies between 100 and 120 pages in length), is called a “sub-region development plan” and includes a feasibility study assessing the socio-economic, agricultural, geological, and climatological variables. The fourth and final part is an investment action plan. In parallel with the twelve provincial volumes, twelve “summaries for administrators” were prepared, serving, in effect, as proposals for pilot projects. These pilots include an assessment of development potential, an action plan, and a budget.

*The Return to Village and Rehabilitation Project**

The aim of the “Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia Region Return to Village and Rehabilitation Project Sub-Regional Development Plan” is to bring the groups who were subjected to involuntary migration and experienced the most severe problems into a productive situation that will be much more beneficial both for themselves and the country; through the right planning of the return to the villages, the costs of involuntary migration for society and the economy will be turned into an opportunity, and, in this context, rather than leaving the process of their return to its natural flow, which, given the current structure of the scattered settlements which are difficult to reach, would come with high service delivery costs and be overly dependent on agricultural activities, a new settlement pattern will be developed that organises the damaged housing and rural service infrastructure around a new understanding and creates a more rational and liveable physical and social environment.

[...]

The main purpose of the project is to develop a model or models for the rehabilitation and sustainability of settlements where a return to the villages is possible and to develop a plan for the implementation

* Translated from the original Turkish in Oğuz Oyan, Melih Ersoy, H. Çağatay Keskinok, H. Tarık Sengül, Galip Yalman, Remzi Sönmez, and Erdal Kurttaş, eds. *Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Köye Dönüş ve Rehabilitasyon Projesi Alt Bölge Gelişme Planı*, 12 vols. (Ankara: GAP Bölge Kalkınma İdaresi (BKI) ve Türk Sosyal Bilimler Derneği, 2001).

of this in selected rural settlements. Within this framework, specifications and suggestions have been developed about the rural settlements, which can be considered sub-regions.

[...]

It has been observed that despite the fact that the southeastern and eastern Anatolian regions have, on the one hand, an extremely dispersed settlement pattern and, on the other hand, a large number of villages and sub-village units, the second- and third-level centres are not developed.

[...]

One of the principal features of the geographically inaccessible settlement structure is the number of small villages and hamlets that are disconnected from one another. This scattered spatial pattern has been the source of considerable problems. The most important of these is the high cost of service delivery. Village communities typically demand the establishment of a school, health centre, post office, and similar service provision facilities in their own villages. However, that could only be realised at a very high cost, and in cases where such services were provided, the facility providing the service would inevitably work below its capacity.

[...]

When looked at on the regional scale, in particular at the level of villages, it has been observed that the ranking (stratification) between settlements is a serious problem. The existing second-category centres are more prominent as service provision centres, whereas, in terms of rural production, they do not have the characteristics of economic units that offer opportunities for the development of markets, trade, and urban production activities. As a result, the lowest settlement units tend to develop commercial relations with the upper tier centres by going beyond the centres to which they are affiliated in terms of service provision. On the other hand, the dispersed settlement structure prevents the articulation of sufficient demand for the development of intermediate level centres. Therefore, instead of intermediate level centres for the economic activities of lower centres, activities that should take place at this level are carried out at higher level centres. For example, in villages where detailed field studies were carried out within the scope of the Return to Village Project, it was observed that the basic activities and facilities that should be found in the first tier were not present. This situation was a characteristic feature of the southeastern and eastern Anatolian regions before the migration.

As a result of all of this, including limited accessibility due to seasonal conditions, the requirements and costs of access have increased more than expected. Moreover, the relative weakness of intermediate centres prevents the formation of horizontal relations between villages. An important feature in the social structure of the eastern and southeastern Anatolia regions, self-contained (inward looking) rural units will be affected positively by the strengthening of intermediate level centres.

In summary, in the planning efforts for the process of return, the aim is to develop an understanding that will promote a stratification of certain settlements in terms of a consolidation (concentration) of services, on the one hand, and economic functions on the other.

The master plan was essentially concerned with state-building in the countryside. The term “rehabilitation” in the title of the plan referred to the treatment of perceived structural handicaps in the settlement structure, the many small rural settlements, their dispersed distribution, and perceived lacks, especially of local level inter-settlement articulation. Therefore, the evacuation of small rural settlements was considered an opportunity for the design of an “improved” (i.e., integrated and more productive) settlement structure. To develop this new, integrated settlement structure, the plan introduced two concepts: sub-region (*alt-bölge*) and centre-village (*merkez-köy*). A sub-region is a virtual cluster of settlements, based on economic, cultural, geographic, and social characteristics. The centre-village is a settlement within a sub-region, which, on the basis of its characteristics—size, location, and infrastructure—could function as a centre, becoming the intermediate entity between a nearby district town and the sub-region of villages and hamlets, and therefore extend the span of control of the central bureaucracy into the countryside.

The East and Southeast Anatolia Region Village Return and Rehabilitation Project Sub-Region Development Plan builds upon a government publication dating from 1982 which provides a classification and ranking of settlements in Turkey. The plan developed a classification system of settlements based on the functions performed (administrative, economic, social, cultural, and political) and a ranking according to their spatial impact (local, sub-regional, regional, national, and international). Executed nationwide, the study concluded that more than 10,000 villages (not including hamlets) were considered to be disconnected from the administrative system. On the basis of its classification, the State Planning Organisation noted a perceived weakness in the state’s bureaucracy in the countryside which, in the southeast in the 1980s and 1990s, had created a space for the PKK to develop its presence, and the apparent need to draw the rural grid more closely into the state system.

The Kemalist elite in Turkey has been preoccupied with the production of places and people as bearers of Turkish identity since the establishment of the Republic. People thought to be infringing on the new national order were subjected to physical erasure (the Armenian genocide), removal (population exchanges with neighbouring countries), and assimilation. In the context of the latter, the Kemalist nation-builders considered the small and dispersed settlement structure to be a barrier to bringing in “civilisation”. To accomplish this mission, a reduction in the number of villages by means of a concentration of the population into larger units was considered necessary so the state could down-scale administration costs

and increase central bureaucratic control over the population. In 1963, 1983, and 1987, costs were calculated for a complete overhaul of the settlement structure by means of “village unification,” while in the 1970s, using the terms “*Merkez-Köy*” (Centre-Village), “*Tarım-Kent*” (Agriculture-City), and “*Köy-Kent*” (Village-City), models were developed for the purposes of administrative clustering and modular urbanisation. It was in this context of perceived tensions between, on the one hand, the extension of the state’s bureaucratic network into the countryside and, on the other hand, the high number of villages and their dispersed make-up that the evacuation of villages in Turkey’s southeast was considered an opportunity. The counter-insurgent clearing of the countryside there created an “opportunity” to redesign the countryside so that the state could more effectively penetrate the daily lives of the inhabitants of rebellious areas. As such, the East and Southeast Anatolia Region Village Return and Rehabilitation Project Sub Region Development Plan can be analysed not only as an extension of a military counterinsurgency through development planning, but also as the resuscitation of a Kemalist nation-building fantasy. In that fantasy, the Kurdish question is one of control and assimilation.

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