

TED University

Department of Political Science and International Relations

PSIR 428 - Ethnic Problems and Nationalism

What is the role of Turkish-style nationalism in the Maraş Massacre?

Doğukan Çağlayan

09.06.2021

Abstract

The Maraş Massacre is one of the biggest massacres in recent Turkish history. The city of Maraş resisted the occupation in the War of Independence and therefore the city was named Kahramanmaraş. The weapons used in the War of Independence against the French occupation would turn to Alevi and left-wing citizens living in the city in 1978. It was as if 111 people, mostly Alevis, died in the massacre, which was rehearsed for the civil war. Like the right-left conflict in Turkey, the Alevi-Sunni conflicts have brought the country to the brink of civil war from time to time. There have been many massacres against Alevis in the country, and the Maraş Massacre is the most serious of them. The Maraş Massacre is one of the most important events that prepared the military coup of September 12, 1980. Various methods were used to provoke nationalist and conservative citizens in the massacre. The research will investigate what methods against nationalists and conservatives contributed to this massacre, and the answer to the question of what role Turkish nationalism plays in the Maraş Massacre will be sought.

KeyWords: Maraş Massacre, Nationalism, Violence, Alevism.

Abbreviations:

MHP: Nationalist Movement Party

TBMM: Grand National Assembly of Turkey

MIT: National Intelligence Organization (Turkey)

CHP: Republican People's Party

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
How and When Did the Massacre Begin?	3
How Many People Actually Died in the Massacre?	4
Traces of Nationalism in the Massacre	4
Nationalist Propaganda Discourses in the Massacre	5
Ökkeş Şendiller and MHP Relationship	5
State's Negligence in the Massacre	6
Maraş Massacre Trials	7
Political Consequences of the Massacre	8
Conclusion	8
References	9

Introduction

Attacks against Alevis and left-wing citizens in Turkey were common throughout the history of the republic, and hundreds of people lost their lives as a result of these attacks. Alevi citizens have been subjected to many massacres such as Sivas, Çorum, Malatya and Maraş. The massacres were mostly committed or organized by nationalists and conservatives. The worst of these massacres was the Maraş Massacre in 1978. Maraş is actually one of the extermination movements for Alevi citizens. Hundreds of people, women, children, young and old were brutally murdered in Maraş. The massacre took place between 19-26 December 1978, but the period before and after the massacre was quite long. Alevis, who were affected by the massacre, had to live with the same fears in every generation. Massacre is still one of the worst nightmares for Alevis like left-socialist segments.

How and When Did the Massacre Begin?

The most embarrassing events in the history of Turkey started with the bombing of Çiçek Cinema, where the movie "When Will The Sun Will Rise", which was watched by more nationalists, was screened on December 19, 1978(Basaran, 2017: 47). The tensions experienced in the past have almost reached the ceiling with this bomb. Right-wingers, who said that leftists dropped the bomb, primarily attacked left-wing people's homes and workplaces. Exacerbating the events, there were events following the murder of 2 leftist teachers and the funerals of the teachers on 21 December. After the funeral, smear and lie campaigns against the Alevis started and the houses where the Alevis lived were marked. The events that started with small attacks grew into a massacre.

How Many People Actually Died in the Massacre?

According to state records, 111 people were killed in the massacre, 210 houses and 80 workplaces were attacked. However, it should be known that the data disclosed in the events where the states are negligent is quite controversial. There are great doubts that the official

data announced for the Maraş Massacre are also not correct. The death numbers announced according to the people who lived and survived the massacre are well below the real numbers. According to some people, the death toll is around 1000(Ertekin, 2020: 38). From the past to the present, Turkey is quite problematic in the data announced by the state. For this reason, the accuracy of the numbers given in the massacre is quite low. The great negligence of the state and security forces in the massacre prevents the disclosure of these numbers. The state did not accept responsibility in the massacre and reduced the deaths to numbers only.

Traces of Nationalism in the Massacre

The Maraş Massacre is very complex because it contains multiple political elements. However, nationalist elements played a very active role in the massacre. After the release of MIT's report dated January 17, 1979, it was revealed that this massacre was actually premeditated(GOKTAS, 2012). In the report, the perception that the Kurds living in the region are working to establish a Kurdish state was given to the people of the region and nationalists. In this way, tension in the region increased day by day. The most important detail that emerged in the report is that it was stated that the massacre was planned by the nationalists in the MHP provincial organization two to three weeks ago(Erdem, 2020). In addition, many evidences that emerged after the massacre showed that the effects of nationalism in the massacre were enormous. It is possible to examine the effects of nationalism in the massacre under many titles.

Nationalist Propaganda Discourses in the Massacre

Claims that the massacre was orchestrated weeks ago by a nationalist group are still unproven. However, there is something that has been proven to be true that after the bombing of the Çiçek Cinema, propaganda was made in the neighborhoods for anti-Alevi sentiment.

The people were provoked against Alevis and Kurds by MHP member groups(Poyraz, 2013: 26). As a result of these provocations, mutual attacks started between the peoples and as a result, it turned into an ethnic massacre. Before the massacre, the region experienced political and ethnic problems. The increasing left-wing influence in the city triggered the extreme right-wing nationalists and the result was a massacre. In the photographs that emerged after the massacre, it is possible to see both the magnitude of the massacre and the effects of the nationalist movement that took part in the massacre. The photographs revealed after the massacre show the role of nationalism in the massacre. The MHP symbols written on the walls and the "fight for God" writing are the biggest examples of this effect. Both nationalists and far-right religious groups took part in the massacre together(Bandeoğlu, 2016: 578). Nationalists initiated the attacks and far-right religious groups turned the attacks into a massacre.

Ökkeş Şendiller and MHP Relationship

Ökkeş Şendiller was born in Kahramanmaraş and was a member of the Grey Wolves Youth Association at the time of the massacre. Şendiller is the number one defendant in the case opened after the Maraş Massacre(Saymaz, 2010). Şendiller was accused of inciting the public by throwing a bomb at the Çiçek Cinema, where the anti-communist movie "When Will the Sun Will Rise" was shown on 19 December 1978. Şengiller is also known as the organizer of anti-Alevi propaganda in the neighborhoods. The closeness between Şengiller and the MHP was not only during the massacre. Şengiller became a Kahramanmaraş deputy from the Nationalist Work Party in the Turkish general elections held in 1991. Şengiller also served as a member of the Human Rights Investigation Committee of the Parliament during his time as a member of parliament. After the arguments he had in his party, he joined the Great Unity Party and served as the Deputy Chairman until 2008. Şengiller is also known for his nationalist statements in his party. The most important defendant in the massacre, whose

real name was Ökkeş Kenger, changed his surname to Şengiller for security after the 1980 Turkish coup d'état. Ökkeş Şendiller changed his surname but could not escape from its history and was also referred to as the murderer.

State's Negligence in the Massacre

On the night of December 22, the first preparations for the attack began with the black propaganda of the nationalists for the Alevis. On 23 December, the events turned from mutual conflict into a massacre against Alevis. As the attacks also turned against the police on December 23, all police officers in the city were dismissed (Sarıaltun, 2015: 31). With this decision, chaos broke out in the city and the events turned into a massacre. A curfew was declared by the government on 24 December. But no one obeyed the curfew. Despite the increasing conflicts in the city, no military force was sent to the city. Nationalists from the surrounding districts also came and participated in the clashes. On December 24, the massacre reached inhuman proportions. The dead and wounded were not allowed to be transported, and people were killed without discrimination of women, children, pregnant women and the elderly. During the massacre, state officials were insufficient to take precautions and almost watched the massacre. Although the government was a left-wing government, the state mind did not give up nationalism. The far-right mentality that sees the Alevis living in the country as a threat has also shown itself in important levels of the state. The MIT report dated January 29, 1978 also revealed this mentality. In the report written one day after the massacre, it was written that nationalists and far-right religious groups were disturbed by the arrests of the soldiers and police after the massacre. The report also warns that if these behaviors continue, the nationalists may also oppose the military with weapons. In the massacre, the state never broke its nationalist structure and acted accordingly. Those who see themselves as the real owner of the country committed a massacre against the minorities living in the country and the state ignored this massacre. After the events, CHP's

Minister of Internal Affairs İrfan Özaydınlı said in his statement that the cause of the events was leftist organizations, showing how deep nationalism is in the state (Meclis Tutanakları, 1978: 41).

Maraş Massacre Trials

The Maraş Massacre is very problematic in the trials, as in the number of dead. The massacre was not investigated in all its aspects and those responsible were not prosecuted. Unfortunately, the criminal trial process of the massacre has not been taken seriously until today. Those who actually took part in the massacre were widely known by the state authorities. The witnesses heard in the massacre consisted of both the public and the employees of institutions such as the hospital and the gendarmerie. The people killed in the massacre in places such as neighborhoods and houses were determined to a large extent. However, those whose identities could not be identified and whose bodies could not be reached were largely not investigated. In addition, those who came to the city under the guise of a national lottery employee and stayed in hotels before the massacre were not sufficiently investigated. It was claimed that these people were members of the Grey Wolves (organization), but no trial was made. The Maraş Massacre was examined as a simple massacre and Ökkeş Kenger and small organizations were identified at the center of the massacre. Neither the soldiers nor the state and government officials who were negligent in the massacre were put on trial in the case (Can, 2020). Those on trial are mostly nationalist groups and members of the public.

Political Consequences of the Massacre

The political picture that emerged after the Maraş Massacre led the country to a great political transformation. With the murder of 3 lawyers following the massacre and the assassination of Adana Police Chief Cevat Yurdakul, who investigated these deaths, the country started to drift into chaos (Aktuna, 2014:61). The murders, which started after the

massacre and generally continued with the killing of intellectuals, brought the country into a spiral of violence. As a result of this spiral of violence, the army seized the government of the country on September 12, 1980(Maraş'dan Sonra, 1978). There are also some claims that the Maraş Massacre was a tool for a coup. After the massacre, the dominant nationalist understanding in the state became even stronger. After the massacre, the transition to conservative and nationalism began and the country came under the dominance of the far right. With the Maraş Massacre, most of the left-socialists and Alevis from the state cadres were liquidated, and extreme right-wing nationalists were brought in. Kahramanmaraş has been the place where Turkey built the conservative nationalist right understanding of the state.

Conclusion

The Maraş Massacre is an event where the heaviest murders in Turkey's recent history took place. According to official figures, 111 people, mostly leftist-socialist and Alevi citizens, lost their lives. According to the people who experienced the massacre, the death toll is around 1000. Allegedly, the massacre was conceived and planned by the nationalists 3 weeks ago. As a result of the plans, propaganda was made on the nationalist feelings of the people and the people were provoked. The dominant nationalist understanding within the state did nothing to prevent the massacre. Despite the leftist government in power, the nationalist order within the state prevailed and the massacre was not deliberately prevented(Saymaz, 2015). The links of the people involved in the massacre with nationalist parties and groups have been revealed. These connections were also reported by the country's intelligence agency through reports. Despite all the evidence and witnesses, the prevailing nationalist thought managed to protect the criminals in the trials. Those responsible for the massacre were either not punished or their sentences were reduced after a while. The left-socialist thought that was on the rise before the massacre was blocked by the 1980

military coup after the massacre. After the coup, the country began to take shape around nationalist-conservative thought. This idea still persists even after 40 years.

References

AKTUNA, A. (2014). Maraş'ta Ahım Kaldı, İkinci Adam Yayınları.

BANDEOGLU, Z. (2016). a Holistic Approach to the Analysis of the Maraş Events,

Retrieved from: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/273740>.

BASARAN, B. (2017). 19 Aralık 1978-Maraş'ta Kan Sesleri, Ozan Yayınevi,

Birikim Dergisi, 46-47, December 1978 - January 1979, Retrieved from:

https://www.birikimdergisi.com/images/UserFiles/images/Spot/70/46-47/maras039dan_sonra_.pdf.

CAN, C., (2020). Maraş, Maraş olalı böyle bir zulüm görmedi!..., Retrieved

from: <https://www.indyturk.com/node/289021/türkiyeden-sesler/maraş-maraş-olalı-böyle-bir-zulüm-görmedi>.

ERDEM, A. K., (2020). Hakim Ertekin 42 yıl önceki "vahşeti" kitaplaştırdı: "Maraş

Katliamı'nda 15-20 bin kişinin hayatı, eski kaçakçı 'Komünist Osman'ın verdiği silah

sayesinde kurtuldu", Retrieved from:

<https://www.indyturk.com/node/281456/haber/hakim-ertekin-42-yıl-önceki-vahşeti-kitaplaştırdı-maraş-katliamında-15-20-bin>.

ERTEKİN, G. O. (2020). Maraş Katliamı Vahşet, Direniş ve İşkence, Dipnot Yayınları.

GOKTAS, K., (2018). MİT raporlarında Maraş katliamı: Ülkü Ocağı'nda planlandı,

polis de öldürdü, Retrieved from:

<https://www.diken.com.tr/mit-raporlarinda-maras-katliami-ulku-ocaginda-planlandi-alevileri-polis-de-oldurdu%EF%BB%BF/>.

POYRAZ, B. (2013). Bellek, Hakikat, Yüzleşme ve Alevi Katliamları, Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/39563633/Bedriye_Poyraz_Bellek_Hakikat_Yüzleşme_ve_Alevi_Katliamları.

SARIALTUN, B. (2015). Gökte Kalan Çılgınlıklar, Vesta Yayınları.

SAYMAZ, I., (2015). Maraş Katliamı, özel hayatmış, Retrieved from: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/maras-katliami-ozel-hayatmis-1267478/>.

SAYMAZ, I., (2010). 32 yıl sonra yeniden: Burası Maraş, buradan çıkış yok... , Retrieved from: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/32-yil-sonra-yeniden-burasi-maras-buradan-cikis-yok-1033294/>.

T.B.M.M. Tutanak Dergisi, (1978), Retrieved from: <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/TUTANAK/TBMM/t18/c018/tbmm18018004.pdf>.