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BEFORE and AFTER “ROBOSKİ”: A PEACE WALL IN TURKEY

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Abstract:

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On the evening of 28th December 2011, 38 people re-enacted a century-old custom as they took the road in the village Gulyazi (known as Roboski in Kurdish) in the district Uludere of the city of Sirnak, Turkey.. With the help of their faithful mules, as well as snow and cold, those people were going to cross the border to reunite with their relatives who live on the other side of the border and most importantly, to earn their livings. After a couple of hours of walking, they meet, catch up, load the goods on to the backs of their mules and start their journey back to Roboski. This is known as border trade, or smuggling. Some of this people were on this journey so that they can make their mother's tombstone done, some wanted to buy a computer, some needed to earn their school expenses, some needed to provide income for home. Hence, all of them had a reason to be on this rough journey, to endure the cold; the soldiers and the sound of *Hurons*, which they had got used to already and yet were afraid of (because most of them are kids). They were joking around, singing songs and yet also they were in fear as they were walking. On the plateau where they stopped to have a break, they were not aware of the fact that these are the very last minutes of their lives.

As I said, this is a century old occupation, and also everybody in the area knew what they were doing, so they did not really have any concerns regarding their security. However, unexpectedly, in 9 36 pm, F-16s which belong to Turkish Army, first shot a flare, and then a bomb, then another bomb, followed by another one, another one and one another. Everybody, except 3 who are alive by chance, were killed by 10.40 pm.

The result was 35 dead, 3 wounded.

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In fact, the story doesn't end here. There is a complicated and still-continuing juridical process, with a village full of people whose lives are disrupted. In fact, the story of Roboski is a never-ending one.

Roboski is not only an event, it is a massacre, which can be discussed from various positions; juridical, political, economic, moral, as it is a multidimensional narrative. However, leaving aside what happened in Roboski, yet within the context of the event as

I keep returning to the story, I want to talk about the peace process in Turkey. What were the circumstances in Turkey before Roboski? What was referred as progress in the name of peace? What changed with Roboski? What did Roboski remind us? What sort of a peace process grew out of Roboski? And finally, the question I saved for the last one, even though we should ask in the beginning: What was Roboski in reality, and what did it become?

Except occasional ceasefires, one can consider the interval between 1984 and 2013 as a real armed conflict period between Turkish army and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In this war, more than 40000 people, including civilians, got killed. The 1990s, when the state of emergency laws were enforced, were the years when the violence was experienced intensely. Apart from the undisguised violence: evacuated villages, fields filled with land mines, overwhelming expansions of forbidden and military zones', and unsolved murders are the types of violence which lead to serious human rights violations. Inhabitants of Roboski have been affected by such violations as Sirnak happens to be one of the cities where the war had been experienced the most. With their villages burnt down to ground and their grasslands forbidden to be used, they were left with no other choice but becoming village guards, which was first introduced in 1987 as a paramilitary structure and involved in border trade which is also referred as smuggling.

Imprisonment of the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan is one of the primary incidents that made the peace talks between Turkey and the Kurdish (at least the Kurdish who happen to consider themselves as one of the parties). Ocalan, who is in prison, mostly called for a truce and lead peace units formed within PKK to return to Turkey. However, until 2005, there was no significant action taken from the government's behalf. It was in 2005, when for the first time, the former prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that the Kurdish problem existed and the government was going to take necessary steps for this problem to be solved by democratic means. And so, despite periods with heavy conflicts, the peace process, even if it was not declared officially, has been starting. Because the Kurdish were no longer ignored, but accepted as an ethnic group who were partially acknowledged as one of the legitimate parties of the problem. Therefore this declaration was the beginning of a new chapter. In addition Oslo talks were, with no doubt, the most

crucial step taken. The Oslo talks, which are assumed to have begun in 2008, were cut in the July of 2011, as it was suggested that there was no concrete outcome. Whilst both parts were blaming one another, the end of talks marked the beginning of another two year long conflict era. Between 2011 and 2013, including the ones massacred in Roboski, 928 people got killed in total (Geerdink, 2015:207).

In fact, Roboski is not the most oppressive and bloodiest massacre against Kurds in Turkey. However, the period of that fall, the way that it is implemented, the rapid and affective reaction of Kurdish nation and authorities took it a very important place for Kurdish people, human rights activists and the Turkish government. From one hand, Kurds, for the first time, succeeded to show a united response that I define it as “*the beginning of peace among Kurds, living in Turkey*”. Since, up to that time, whereas there was a hostile relationship between the paramilitary group as known “*village guards*” and the Kurds who support the Kurdish movement. So it can be said that Roboski has a transformative power on the peace among Kurds. One of the reasons behind that was some of the victims of the massacre were children of village guards who traditionally side by Turkish state. On the other hand, it was well understood that the emotional link that were supposed to exist between Kurds and other ethnic groups in Turkey, was very fragile. This is because, just two days after massacre new year celebration activities effusively took place. The deputy chairperson of ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP-AKP in Turkish) Huseyin Celik commented on the massacre as “*an operational casualty*” and none of the state officers, apart from district governor, haven’t visited the area that massacre took place. Turkish Army declared that they were considered as a terrorist group referring the previous attacks to Turkish border; the whole Turkish media were silent and did not see the massacre for twelve hours, no one has been taken to court or prosecuted since then and national mourning was not declared in Turkey (Oral, 2015; Geerdink, 2015; Tuzcuoğlu, 2014).

On the other hand, all these insensitivities make Roboski more efficient. And Roboski massacre became a very important destination on the way to peace. This destination reminds so much to the both parts, and must be kept in this way; because the facts which were reminded by Roboski are the social and political obstacles against peace culture in

Turkey. If these problems can be solved democratically, peace culture will be emerged in Turkey. The facts which were reminded can be listed briefly as follow:

- Lives that changed, transformed in a flash; one of the victims mother's voices her feelings as follow: "We have completely forgotten the past. Since then we only feel the severity of that day, only the pain of that day, only the horrify of that day... if you visit the houses in the village, you will see the big, very big pictures of victims. It cleared away all beautiful days that we had in the past. It wiped everything off." (Oral, 2015: 37).
- Mines, military zones, unpermitted lands
- Village guard system and border smuggling
- Political-symbolic importance of city, village names that changed from Kurdish to Turkish.
- The delicate balance between security policies and trust
- "Justice" rather than "revenge"
- Confrontation and accountability

Roboski trial is still continuing. Victims' families gather every Thursday in graveyard holding the pictures of their killed children. However, since that day there are very important developments in the both parts' peace effort. Peace process started at March 21, 2013. The most important outcomes are establishment of "*committee of wise men and withdraw of PKK fighters from Turkish borders*". Ceasefire has been continued for two years so far. But, an important deficiency that will increase the credibility of peace process still hasn't been accomplished: Lack of legal infrastructure. When this step is provided, the justice for Roboski very likely will be secured.

Roboski is not only a name of a village that ordinary people only pursue their daily lives anymore, but also the name of an incident that both emotional and practical disengagements took place (in political terms, Turkish media's news conducts, in the language of state authorities and the difference on a common pain) and a name of a wall that needs to be demolished.

As Walter Benjamin points out “*every true story shelter in valuable things, either explicitly or latently*”(Benjamin, 2008: 80). In Roboski, the story of dead people ended but the story continues for those who are still alive, as a justice-seeking narrative. And despite all the problems and negativity, people of Roboski are still seeking to see social peace take place immediately in Turkey. As every body need peace.

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