

Citizens left wondering what to call themselves after general's remark

Friday 24 April 2009, by [Abdullah Bozkurt](#)

For the average citizen in Turkey, last week's identity and feeling of belonging debate, stirred up by a speech delivered by Gen. İlker Başbuğ, the chief of general staff, did not matter much, but academics and pundits rushed to offer their take on what the general meant and what the possible implications for the future of democracy in Turkey are.

Tuncay Akçay, 41, a switch phone operator and receptionist from Kırıkkale, a city near Ankara, says he is proud to be a citizen of Turkey, but says he cherishes his ethnic roots, which go back to the Black Sea region on his father's side and to the Caucasus on his mother's. "I would very much like to keep my family heritage alive and intact," he said, adding half-jokingly that he married a lady from Artvin to continue enjoying spicy food at home.

Hakan Hiçyılmaz, 37, was born and raised in Ankara. He says he has no issues with how to identify himself. A security guard in the capital's Balgat district, he said: "I do not feel confused or lost with my identity at all." His father is Circassian from the mountainous Caucasus and his mother Turkmen from the Central Asian plateau. "I'm a Turkish citizen, plain and simple," he stressed.

This attitude permeates much of the country today, with the possible exception of Kurds in the Southeast, where nationalist aspirations are visible, although there is much disagreement there as well. "When you are introduced to a person, he or she usually gives you their name, their hometown and their family roots, entirely leaving the question of identity out of the discussion," said Hasan Celal Güzel, who has written extensively on Turkish identity. Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Güzel noted that there is much confusion on the issue among intellectuals and said the debate in most cases was restricted to labels devoid of substance.

The renewed discussion on how to define a citizen in the country was triggered last Tuesday when Başbuğ for the first time used the phrase "the people of Turkey" to describe Turkish identity and loosened the strict interpretation of citizenship from the military's perspective. He quoted renowned philosophers and writers such as Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, Eliot Cohen and Montesquieu to support his position on a seemingly marked shift in civilian-military relations in Turkey.

The chief of general staff stressed that there is no ethnic dimension to Turkish identity and said people who established this republic are called the Turkish nation, a reference to a much earlier speech given by the founder of the nation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Başbuğ stripped the ethnic and religious attributes from the term "Turk" and said, "Any other endeavor to load ethnicity to this all-inclusive term is artificial."

The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) appears to have come to grips with a broader definition of Turkish citizenship, judging from its top general's strong emphasis on the US President Barack Obama's speech. "We don't consider ourselves Christian, Jewish, Muslim. We consider ourselves a nation bound by a set of ideals and values," Obama said of the United States. "Turkey has similar principles," Obama added. Başbuğ listed common values binding Turkish citizens as "independence, democracy, integrity of the republic and providing peace, happiness and tranquility to individuals and society."

Onur Öymen, deputy chairman of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), acknowledges the similarities between the definition of Turkish citizenship and the US one. "We both define citizenship by

birthplace rather than by blood,” he explained to Sunday’s Zaman on Thursday, stressing the definition is not based on ethnicity, creed or religion.

“The general’s speech is of great importance,” says Haşim Haşimi, a prominent Kurdish politician. “The military using the phrase ‘the people of Turkey,’ which has for long fought against its use and encouraged the prosecution of those who used it, is a major breakthrough,” he told Sunday’s Zaman. He said he has no problem whatsoever with defining himself as a citizen of Turkey while acknowledging his Kurdish ethnicity at the same time. “I think, with Başbuğ’s remarks, the state has strengthened its governance,” Haşimi noted.

Definition of citizenship

The controversy over defining citizens has its roots in the Turkish Constitution and all its amendments. Article 88 of the first Constitution, adopted in 1924, stated: “Irrespective of religion or race, all are called ‘Turks’ with respect to citizenship.” The expression “irrespective of religion or race,” was later dropped. Instead, both the 1961 and 1982 constitutions continued to define Turkishness as the legal bond of citizenship: “All who are bound to the Turkish state through citizenship are Turkish.” They did not specify that all citizens of Turkey are ethnically Turkish or that those who are not ethnically Turkish cannot be citizens of the Republic of Turkey.

Still the emphasis on “Turkishness” raises the eyebrows of many who strongly identify themselves with Kurdish ethnicity, says Bülent Aras, a professor at İstanbul’s Işık University. He noted that the term “Turkishness” has an exclusionary meaning by itself and said he finds the “the people of Turkey” phrase much better. “Başbuğ’s speech has positive tones and is a good start,” he told Sunday’s Zaman. “The military is finally officially recognizing the multicultural aspect of Turkey’s society without promoting fears of a disintegration of the Turkish state.”

Şahin Alpay, a liberal columnist, wrote in Today’s Zaman, however, that “Turkishness signifies a judicial and not an ethno-cultural identity,” adding that “citizens of the Turkish Republic do not have to consider themselves Turkish in the ethnic and cultural meaning of the term.” He cautioned, however, that “the consensus over the concept of Turkish identity needs to find reflection in its implementation, because even though the constitutions define Turkishness by citizenship, the implementation has been very different.”

Still, other proposals on how to define people in this country continue to create controversy. The term “Türkiyeli,” (“of Turkey” or “those from Turkey”) was not received well in Turkey. The proponents of the term sought to create a neutral term to include every citizen in the country, very much the same way “British” or “the UK” accommodates the identities of the English, the Scottish, Welsh and others.

Baskın Oran and İbrahim Kaboğlu, two professors who were asked to work for the Committee on Human Rights established by the Office of the Prime Minister in 2004, proposed the “Türkiyeli” solution to define the supra identity while allowing sub-identities in various forms, in a report on identity questions in Turkey. They became the subject of a smear campaign and were taken to court and prosecuted for insulting Turkishness, only to be found not guilty in 2008.

Güzel opposed the “Türkiyeli” idea from the start. He says the term hangs in the air and has no connection to reality whatsoever. “You simply can’t find the corresponding word for ‘Türkiyeli’ in other languages,” he said, adding, “It is simply an imaginary invention which limits the definition of citizenship to a specific geographic area.” The citizenship of the Republic of Turkey is a broader definition that encompasses all sub-ethnic identities, Güzel argued.

[Today’s Zaman](#), Abdullah Bozkurt, Sunday, 19 April 2009