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Turkey: Between the Hammer and the Anvil

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The roots of Turkey's ongoing security crisis date back to domestic political developments during the early summer of 2015. The decision of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) to officially run as a party list in the June 2015 elections, instead of fielding its candidates as independents as it had in the past, put an end to the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) thirteen-year one party government, when the HDP list garnered enough votes to pass the 10 percent threshold to enter parliament. In the aftermath of losing its parliamentary majority during the June 2015 election, the AKP readjusted its electoral strategy for the November 2015 election, which was scheduled when a multi-party coalition government failed to materialize in the aftermath of the June elections. The AKP's new election strategy sought to win the support of Turkish nationalist voters by taking a hard line against the PKK and the Kurds, betting this approach would compensate for votes that it lost to the HDP in June. The AKP's gamble appeared to pay off when it won the November 2015 elections, re-establishing its one-party government.

Many argue that Turkey's declaration of war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was part of the AKP's grand-electoral strategy during the summer of 2015. Nevertheless, it was made after the PKK targeted Turkish security forces, following an Islamic State (IS) terrorist attack against Turkey's Kurds in Suruç in July 2015. For its part, the PKK held the government responsible for turning a blind eye to IS's activities inside Turkey, and thus indirectly causing the death of 33 Turkish citizens of mostly Kurdish origin in Suruç. While the government included the Islamic State in its declaration of war, in practice, it concentrated its resources on the PKK. And while the military's offensive against the PKK was conducted at full throttle, the decision makers in Ankara did everything they could to avoid a direct confrontation with the IS.

The declaration of war against the PKK suspended the peace process that was launched unofficially in 2009 between Ankara and the PKK. The recent heavy exchange of fire in Turkey's southeast region—especially in Şırnak's Cizre district and in Diyarbakır's old city compound, Sur – indicates that the PKK used the long term ceasefire during the peace process as an opportunity to strengthen its positions in the southeast. Unlike previous confrontations between the two sides that mostly took place in the mountainous regions of Turkey, during this round, the PKK engaged in urban warfare against the Turkish military: it barricaded city centers, booby trapped buildings, dug trenches and tunnels that limited the military's ability to maneuver, and even managed to surprise the military in some cases. Unsurprisingly, this kind of urban guerrilla warfare resulted in a high number of casualties for the both sides and reduced the southeast's city centers, which had flourished during the peace process, to rubble.

On February 17 and March 13, 2016, an offshoot of the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), carried out suicide bombings in Ankara that claimed 67 lives and changed the face of the war between the government and the Kurdish militants. TAK's suicide bombings were designed to take the fight from severely damaged and densely Kurdish populated regions to the large Turkish cities. Having been encouraged by the peace process between 2009 and 2015, some Turkish citizens have protested the actions and policies of both sides of the conflict. However, the growing violence and deteriorating security situation polarized the public discourse. For instance, on the one hand, Turkish nationalists use social media to accuse Turks who denounce violence and criticize the government's policies of being PKK supporters,¹ while on the other hand, there are many Kurdish social media users in Turkey who have expressed their support and satisfaction with the TAK's suicide bombing attacks that shook the Turkish capital to its core.² Supporters of these deadly attacks characterize them as legitimate revenge rather than terrorism. This increasingly polarized discourse is contributing to the rise of uncompromising Turkish and Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.

Paradoxically, the banalization of terrorism is taking place at the precise moment that the severity of the attacks is reaching unprecedented levels. Despite a rapidly deteriorating security situation, politicians are seeking to exploit the crisis for electoral gain rather than calling for restraint. For instance, in January 2016, Prime Minister Davutoğlu, attempting to expand his party's appeal among Turkey's nationalist constituency, said that the government would continue

¹ @Takvim, Twitter post, March 17, 2016, 1:35pm, <https://twitter.com/takvim/status/710565143109902336>; and, for more along these lines, see: "Hain Akademisyenler" ("Traitor academics") on Twitter.

² @Kuropotkine, Twitter post, March 10, 2016, 10:45am, <https://twitter.com/Kuropotkine/status/709072910154072066>.

fighting until it eradicated terror and put an end to PKK's activities inside Turkey.³ However, previous experience has demonstrated that this objective was not likely to be achieved without a viable peace process.

The war against the PKK has also had direct consequences on Turkey's foreign policy. In order to receive United States and the European Union's political support during the military operation against the PKK, and to punish the IS for the Suroç terror attack (July 2015). Turkey allowed coalition forces to use its İncirlik airbase to launch air strikes against the IS. As a result of its cooperation with the anti-IS coalition, Turkey has enjoyed an almost absolute silence and lack of public criticism from its Western allies during its war against the PKK.

Ankara's declaration of war against the Islamic State has had serious consequences for Turkish decision makers. The IS appears to have recognized the meaning of Turkey's policy of paying lip-service to the West's anti-IS coalition but in reality directing most of its efforts against the PKK and responded by conducting "proportionate" terrorist attacks against Kurdish targets in Turkey. Following the Suroç attack, on October 10, 2015, the Islamic State targeted a Kurdish HDP political gathering killing 109 civilians. Since the Kurds of Turkey began openly identifying with their kinsmen fighting against the IS during the siege of Kobani between September 2014 and January 2015 in Northern Syria (Rojava), the IS has targeted Kurds in Turkey rather than government targets. The Kurds' gains in Syria, which have allowed them to carve out a Kurdish autonomous region that borders Turkey, poses a far greater security concern, in Ankara's view, than the Islamic State.

The IS's most recent suicide attacks that shook Istanbul's biggest tourist destinations – the old city's Sultanahmet Square (January 12) and İstiklal Pedestrian Mall (March 19), in which 11 German tourists, 3 Israelis, and an Iranian were killed – can be viewed as an attempt to punish Turkey by targeting Turkey's foreign tourism. The IS refrained from killing Sunni Muslim Turkish citizens, and may have been specifically trying to attack those it perceived as legitimate targets in its eyes.

It is also important to note the time of the attacks. In both cases, the suicide bombings were carried out when the two sites were relatively empty, in comparison to busier times of the day. Therefore, the IS's main objective may not have been to kill as many civilians as possible but rather to find and kill

³ "Davutoğlu: Operasyonlar için süre söz konusu değil" [Davutoğlu: There is no time limit for the operations], *Al-Jazeera* (Turkish), <http://aljazeera.com.tr/haber/davutoglu-operasyonlar-icin-sure-soz-konusu-degil>

“qualitative targets.” By doing so, the IS sent a very clear message to Turkey that is capable of punishing Turkey at any time it chooses.

In addition to managing its conflicts with the PKK and the IS, Turkey’s security services are also trying to cope with a massive flow of Syrian refugees across its borders. According to many reports, a large number of IS and TAK militants have managed to infiltrate into Turkey as refugees. This in turn creates a serious problem for refugees both in Turkey and abroad. In Europe, unemployment and the rising cost of living, combined with ethno-religious and security concerns, have led to growing public criticism of policies that advocate providing the refugees with asylum. Ironically, Turkey’s open support for the Syrian opposition has sustained the Syrian war and fueled the refugee crisis.

The government in Turkey can no longer isolate its domestic and foreign policies from one another. The government’s decisions in both areas will have immediate consequences for the country. Recent terrorist attacks revealed that the Turkish security forces were unprepared to deal with these kinds of threats. Turkey’s government is faced with a new reality where non-state actors are using terrorism as a tactic to influence the government’s policies.

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