

## PKK-Turkey War: Implications for Middle East and Turkey

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### Introduction

The Kurdish question can be traced back to the Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920 between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied forces, which envisaged the creation of a Kurdish state<sup>1</sup>. But the plan was annulled when Young Turks under Kemal Ataturk won the 'Independence War.' The resultant Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 not only established the boundaries of modern Turkey but also forced division of Kurdish people in four different countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The establishment of Turkish Republic was accompanied by a narrowly defined ethno-linguistic Turkish nationalism and policies of '*Turkification*'<sup>2</sup>, eschewing pluralism and implying forcible assimilation of other ethnic minorities.

Kurds resisted forcible assimilation and took up arms against the new Turkish state under Sheikh Said in a revolt in 1925, which was brutally crushed<sup>3</sup>. Ararat uprising in 1930 met the same fate. Kurdish revolts continued in fits and starts till late 1970s, when PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) was formed by Abdullah Ocalan<sup>4</sup>. PKK was a Marxist-inspired group with roots in non-tribal society and struggled for an independent Kurdish state. It waged war against Turkey in 1984 that raged on until 1999, when Ocalan was captured and PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire<sup>5</sup>. The war cost more than 40,000 lives on both sides and had a concomitant economic cost that, according to some estimates, ran into billions of dollars<sup>6</sup>.

When AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, Prime Minister Tayyip Recip Erdogan recognized the existence of a 'Kurdish Problem' and his government policies brought in significant changes. He granted greater autonomy to Kurdish region in southeast Turkey and invested billions of dollars for its development. Ban on use of Kurdish language was lifted and TV and radio stations started broadcasting programs in Kurdish<sup>7</sup>. Most significant of all was the initiative to start negotiation with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is incarcerated in a prison in Imrali Island on Marmara Sea. These government policies paved the way for a truce that took effect in March 2013, which lasted till July 23 2015, when Turkey

started a new wave of aerial strikes against PKK in Qandil Mountains in Iraq and police and paramilitary raids arrested thousands of PKK workers inside Turkey<sup>8</sup>.

This paper seeks to explain the Turkish motives for this war and attempts to answer questions like, how key internal political developments in Turkey and external political developments in neighboring countries inform this new eruption of violence between Turkey and PKK. Does the Incirlik deal with the US imply a shift in strategic thinking in Turkey or is it a ploy to neutralize gains by PKK's sister organization, YPG (People's Protection Units) in neighboring Syria? What will be the implications of this war for both Turkey and the Middle East?

### **Turkish-PKK War: Genesis and Motives**

On July 20, 2015, a group of young socialist Kurds gathered in Suruc district, Turkey. They had planned to go to Kobani in Syria and help in its reconstruction, where infrastructure and services had largely been destroyed due to heavy fighting between YPG and IS, resulting in the defeat of the latter. As they were mobilizing their resources, a bomb ripped through the congregation and killed more than 30 people<sup>9</sup>. Turkey blamed it on ISIS but it did not claim this attack, whereas Kurds accused Turkish intelligence collusion with ISIS and started attacking Turkish police in retaliation<sup>10</sup>. Two days later, on 22 July 2015, Turkey signed Incirlik deal (discussed below) with US and joined the so-called anti-ISIS coalition and launched aerial strikes against ISIS and PKK in both Syria and Iraq respectively. This chronological order of events does not take into account the tension that had been brewing between Kurds and nationalist Turks and the Turkish state since the siege of Kobani by ISIS in October 2014 or of the result of June 7 2015 elections in Turkey in which AKP (Justice and Development Party) was denied a simple majority in Parliament. It is interesting to note that HDP (People's Democratic Party) a pro-Kurdish party surpassed the constitutional electoral threshold of 10 percent and got 13 percent of overall vote in these elections.

When Kobani came under siege by ISIS in October 2014, thousands of Kurds across Turkey took to the streets to demonstrate and protest against AKP party, which they held responsible for the siege of Kurdish town in Syria. Turkey was accused of providing a safe conduit for different militant groups to cross over to Syria and fight Assad regime, but it barred PKK from supporting its sister organization YPG that was battling ISIS. Turkish government policy was supposedly shaped by its foreign policy

objectives of getting rid of Assad and averting the 'threat' of a strong Kurdish faction, the YPG in its neighborhood. The government in Turkey has been reluctant to support Syrian Kurds for fear that their gains might encourage Kurds in Turkey to revive their movement and claim greater autonomy or even independence. The severe clashes between Kurd protestors and Turk nationalists and police forces claimed over 50 lives<sup>11</sup>. It was the beginning of the end of the truce.

A factor of still greater political significance was the Turkish election results of 7 June. In a historic first, HDP (People's Democratic Party) crossed the electoral threshold of 10 percent and gained 13 percent of overall vote, denying AKP a simple majority to form a single-party government<sup>12</sup>. AKP party and President Erdogan had been for quite some time alluding to a presidential form of government in Turkey. But Turkish voters dashed those hopes or at least delayed such an eventuality. A perception developed that Turkish government used the Suruc attack and its subsequent initiation of aerial strikes against ISIS as a pretext to attack PKK hideouts in Qandil Mountains of Iraq and arrest thousands of its workers inside Turkey<sup>13</sup>. This perception contains an element of truth and gets substantiated when one compares the number of arrests made in anti-PKK raids in the month of July, when the war started, with operations against ISIS over the last six months<sup>14</sup>. They were three times higher. Moreover, Turkish air force carried out fourteen different waves of airstrikes against PKK, pounding more than four hundred targets, whereas against ISIS it just conducted one operation, hitting not more than three targets in the month of July<sup>15</sup>. Turkish government's statements give a tentative peep into the nature of these aerial strikes. Government claims its "air force has hit PKK shelters, bunkers, storage facilities and other logistic points in northern Iraq, including Qandil Mountains where PKK's high command is based."<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, it did not share any details of what the jets had targeted in their strikes against ISIS in Syria.

The inevitable retaliation in kind by PKK has all but created a civil war like situation in Turkey. In this nearly two month period since the war started, more than one hundred Turkish security forces have been killed and PKK casualties number more than one thousand, according to the Anatolian News Agency<sup>17</sup>. More than ninety civilians have also died. More ominously, it has encouraged the dialectics of ethnic particularism within a considerable segment of Kurdish population and a virulent nationalism among Turks, reminiscent of late 80s and early 90s. In the process, HDP (People's Democratic Party) finds itself in a difficult situation. Besides being instrumental in mediating between Turkish government and PKK for a negotiated

settlement of Kurdish issue, HDP under Selattin Demirtas garnered a significant number of non-Kurdish votes which enabled it to surpass the electoral threshold and brightened the prospects of peaceful resolution of the intractable political issues between Kurds and the central government in Ankara. But in recent times it has come under a sustained attack by both the government and pro-government media by linking it to PKK and mobs have vandalized and ransacked its political offices in different provinces<sup>18</sup>. All this is being orchestrated to delegitimize HDP and push it below the electoral threshold. By courting nationalists and garbing himself as a warrior leader, Erdogan and AKP have their eyes on votes of HDP and MHP (Nationalist Action Party), a Turkish nationalist party, in snap elections on November 1. Snap elections were called when no party was able to cobble a coalition government<sup>19</sup>.

### **Incirlik Deal: Running with Militants and Hunting with US**

On July 22, 2015 the USA and Turkey reached a deal which would allow US jets to fly from Incirlik base in southeast Turkey and pound ISIS bases in Syria<sup>20</sup>. Turkey formally became a part of anti-ISIS coalition and started pounding ISIS targets in Syria. The strategic significance of this base lies in its close proximity to IS-controlled territories in Syria, reducing travel distance to just 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Incirlik base to target areas<sup>21</sup>. They also proposed to create a so-called 'safety zone' of 65 miles within Syrian territory<sup>22</sup>. Reports in a Turkish daily even claimed that Turkish military forces entered the proposed 'safety zone' along with Sultan Murat Brigade, on August 10<sup>23</sup>.

Ever since the emergence of ISIS, Turkey has been found wanting in its efforts to halt the continuous flow of militants and weapons to Syria from Turkish borders. Its position has been one of wobbling in a 'grey area' of active support and positive indifference<sup>24</sup>. Turkish border with Syria has not only been a safe conduit for foreign fighters joining ISIS but shipments of weapons, including rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, metal piping used in the production of mortar tubes and sacks of fertilizer, too have been funneled across Turkish border<sup>25</sup>. Turkish support to groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra Front too is an open secret<sup>26</sup>.

So do these developments –Incirlik deal and Turkey joining anti-ISIS coalition– signify an important strategic shift in thinking in Turkey? It is too early to give a definite answer, but contextualizing these major political developments on the one

hand, in internal developments in Turkey and its foreign policy goals in Syria and in important regional and international developments on the other hand; one could get a greater understanding of the factors that underpin this policy shift in Turkey.

Though how internal political developments influence Turkey's foreign policy has been discussed in the previous section, its foreign policy goals in Syria deserves some dilation along with discussion on the important regional and international developments.

Since the Syrian uprising in early 2011, the overarching goal of Turkey has been to significantly weaken Assad regime and ultimately topple it by supporting opposition forces. The latter held their first meeting in Antalya in Southern Turkey<sup>27</sup>. On 23 August 2011, Syrian National Council was formed in Turkey and it established its headquarters in Istanbul<sup>28</sup>. Free Syrian Army too found in Ankara a willing supporter and along with Free Syrian Officers set up its headquarters in Hatay province of Turkey<sup>29</sup>.

From its foreign policy goals emanated Turkey's policy of 'positive indifference' regarding the movement of foreign fighters and weapons into Syria through Turkey. Moreover, there is no plausible explanation for a 'safety zone' - if one discounts for a fleeting moment the threat for Turkey of a contiguous Kurdish enclave in Syria- other than a safe base with air protection for the 'floundering rebels'- read Ahrar al-Sham and the non-existent Free Syrian Army, metaphorically speaking.

Turkey has been a US ally since Cold War. It became a member of NATO, allowed Jupiter missiles on its soil and even sent its forces to fight alongside GIs in the Korean War<sup>30</sup>. But policy discrepancies in the form of Turkish Parliament's refusal to allow its bases to US for 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' and its reluctance to join the anti-ISIS coalition, along with the Iran-USA deal on former's nuclear program, might have made policy-makers in Ankara to take stock of the Turkey's greater isolation and rethink its foreign policy priorities<sup>31</sup>.

Of all the factors, the significant gains by YPG (People's Protection Units), sister organization of PKK, against ISIS in Syria, seems to be the most plausible explanation for policy shift in Turkey. YPG has gained considerable autonomy in Kurdish regions in Syria since 2012 as Assad regime spread and dispersed its forces to fight the opposition forces. YPG not only resisted the four-month siege of Kobani and finally

routed ISIS with the help of the US aerial strikes in January 2015<sup>32</sup>, but it also expanded its control when ISIS was ousted from Tal Abyad in June 2015<sup>33</sup>. These gains by the sister organization of PKK in Syrian border region created apprehensions in Turkey of a fear of a contiguous Kurdish enclave, which could revive Kurdish national aspirations and buttress the position of PKK in Turkey, thus posing a 'threat' to the territorial integrity of Turkey. The planned 'safety zone,' if it ever takes place, besides giving protective cover to the 'floundering rebels' in the proposed corridor, will also deny Kurdish enclaves in Syria a geographical contiguity.

### **Implications for Turkey and Middle East**

Turkish-PKK war and Turkey's policies in neighboring states will have significant implications for both Turkey and the Middle East. AKP (Justice and Development Party) under Erdogan had taken great strides to recognize and resolve the 'Kurdish Question' peacefully. The cultural and political autonomy in Kurdish region along with significant economic investment paved the way for a truce in March 2013<sup>34</sup>. This new eruption of violence between PKK and Turkey has considerably undermined these efforts. Selahatiin Demirtas, co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish HDP, aptly described the situation when he said, "Turkey is on the brink of a civil war."<sup>35</sup> The increasing violence between PKK and Turkish government could possibly risk inter-communal disharmony. The siege of Cizre, pulse of Kurdish nationalism, by Turkish security forces and the subsequent killing of more than thirty people along with the attacks by mobs on HDP political offices and violence in Kurdish southeast and beyond prognosticate an ominous scenario for Turkey unless the prevailing political dynamics are reversed. Moreover, the government executive order to transfer the authority to plan and execute operations from governors to the military is indicative of greater militarization of the civil war<sup>36</sup>. In all this process, the crucially important role of HDP for the peaceful and democratic resolution of Kurdish problem is being severely undermined. Turkish government and pro-government media have left no stone unturned to label HDP as an extension of PKK and encourage mobs to vandalize and ransack its offices. The marginalization of HDP will jeopardize the efforts to revitalize talks on Kurdish issue in future.

In addition to the domestic implications, this war and pursuit of foreign policy objectives by Turkey in its neighboring states will also have significant bearing upon the region. Though Turkey has joined the so-called anti-ISIS coalition and opened

Incirlik base for US jets to pound ISIS targets, its simultaneous attacks on PKK hideouts in Iraq and tank artillery shelling against YPG from across Turkish border, betrays the duality of Turkish policy goals: its aerial strikes, shelling and tank attacks weaken the strongest force on the ground confronting ISIS which Turkey also claims to be fighting<sup>37</sup>. The significance of this factor increases manifold in the context of the recent gains by ISIS in Syria. It defeated Syrian forces at Palmyra. ISIS has recently taken control of the oilfield at Jazal and the airbase at Abo al Dohur in Idlib province<sup>38</sup>. The announcement of amnesty for 70,000 military deserters by Bashir al-Asad shows the effect the interminable civil war has had on his overstretched forces, which somehow implies an even greater role for his external supporters<sup>39</sup>. Hamid- Razi Taraghi, the international affairs spokesman for the Islamic Coalition Party, in one of his statements said, "Iran is prepared to send Iranian forces into Syria...if necessary, we will send up to 100,000 Basij or revolutionary guards. They are always ready."<sup>40</sup> This rhetoric aside, the fact that Hezbollah and Iranian military generals have been fighting alongside Assad regime has been an open secret. But it nevertheless shows the greater involvement of foreign forces which might help exacerbate the precarious situation in Syria. Russia too has entered the fray, launching air strikes by air jets and helicopters gunships against IS and rebel forces fighting Assad regime. It has deployed multiple-role SU-30 SM fighter aircraft which have significant air-to-air capabilities, along with Pantsir-SI air defence systems and guided missile cruiser at Latakia<sup>41</sup>. In addition to this, five large Russian aircrafts have delivered additional supplies to military base adjoining Latakia airport<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, Russia has fired cruise missiles ( SS-N-30 A Kalibr) from its warships of Caspian flotilla against multiple targets in Syria<sup>43</sup>. The deployment and bringing into use such weapons in what seems like counter-insurgency operations, raises many questions regarding Russian goals in Syria. Besides its primary purpose of protecting its ally in Syria-the only country in Middle east hosting a Russian base- direct Russian involvement has a clear element of 'force demonstration' and through centralization of its role in this conflict, Russia could possibly force West to rethink its sanctions imposed in the wake of Russian invasion of Crimea.

Reacting to these developments, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said, "In Syria we have seen a troubling escalation of Russian military activities...NATO is ready and able to defend all allies, including Turkey, against any threat."<sup>44</sup> These official statements come in the wake of announcement of plans to increase NATO's rapid response force to 40,000 men and to conduct Trident Juncture-massive NATO military exercise in a decade<sup>45</sup>.

Though these recent military and political developments are significant, it would be stretching the point to make out of these events a scenario of potential 'Cold War' or a proxy war in Syria between US-led NATO and Russia. Both recognize IS as a threat and Western powers have recently toned down their 'stubborn' demand of Assad's exclusion in any transition government. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu even said that Russia was ready to coordinate its airstrikes with US.

**Conclusion:**

To recapitulate, this new eruption of violence and a wave of attacks between PKK and Turkish forces were a result of significant internal political developments in Turkey (read HDP's gains in June elections) and regional situation. At the regional level, direct Russian intervention in Syria and its attacks on both IS and rebel forces has not set well with Turkey, which had further cause of anger with Russia when it violated its air space. In this entire situation, YPG's relevance as a potent ground force against IS, in Syria, increases. And as November elections in Turkey inch closer, instability and chaos seem to increase, illustrated by the recent Ankara bombings in which close to 100 people died. So far no group has claimed responsibility for this attack. It is worth recollecting that Suruc bombings too went unclaimed and paved the way for PKK and Turkish war. What future holds for Turkey and PKK is a moot point and it is difficult to predict anything in an ongoing war, but a silver lining in this tumultuous situation is the statement of Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization that includes PKK, immediately after the attack, "Heeding calls from Turkey and abroad, our movement has decided on a state of inactivity by our guerillas, unless our people and our guerilla forces are attacked." <sup>46</sup>

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## Endnotes

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