

# Turkey: Erdoğan's Bloody Gambit - The PKK main target

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**The Turkish government is using the massacre in Suruç to wage war — not on ISIS, but on the Kurdish liberation movement.**

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On July 20 a suicide bombing took the lives of thirty-one socialists in Suruç. A delegation of the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF) was on its way to Kobanê to help with the reconstruction of the city, and build a library and a playground.

The massacre took place in the yard of the Amara Cultural Center, a meeting point for those who flock to the Turkish border to show solidarity with the struggle in Kobanê or even cross the border. During a public declaration, a twenty-year-old ISIS supporter blew himself up amid some three hundred people.

The result: thirty-one dead and many more injured — a brutal and heinous attack on socialists from Turkey who stand in solidarity with the Kurdish national liberation movement and are struggling against Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) party — a party which by now basically is the state [1].

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed their condolences, but Erdoğan neither cut his trip to Cyprus short, nor did he declare a day of national mourning (as was declared after King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia passed away earlier this year).

International messages of condolence were mostly addressed to Erdoğan, and the Western media near-unanimously stated that "ISIS terror has now struck Turkey as well." It was sometimes added that the attack may have been an act of revenge after a small number of ISIS supporters were detained a few weeks before, and Turkey was seemingly finally showing some motivation to join the fight against ISIS. However, this attack did not hit "Turkey" or her state institutions, but socialists, mostly young, who were expressing solidarity with the Kurdish struggle.

As was soon to become clear, this attack was only the prelude to a flurry of frenetic events unfolding in the days following the massacre, initiating a new phase in Turkey — state of emergency and war. War, directed not against ISIS, but against the revolutionary left and the Kurdish national liberation movement.

## **The AKP and the Negotiation Process**

In order to properly understand these developments, it is necessary to consider the larger context and the struggles of recent years. In 2012–13 a negotiation process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was initiated. The PKK started this process from a position of strength, as the guerrilla forces had several swaths of land under their control in the provinces of Hakkari and Şırnak.

At about the same time, beginning in July 2012, the revolution in Rojava had begun to take shape. While the YPG should not be simply equated with the PKK, they are both armed groups within the same, much larger movement. As the Kurdish movement already had a strong hegemony in the predominantly Kurdish provinces in Turkey, it was possible to focus on the political struggle there, while the military defense of Rojava was paramount.

Throughout this process, the AKP, whose hegemony in Turkey was already in decline at the time, as most clearly evidenced by the Gezi Uprising in June 2013, did not take even one serious step forward. Both sides were using the process to further their own interests and strengthen their respective positions within the relations of forces. Erdoğan's wager was that he could present himself as the leader pacifying Turkey and secure the conservative Kurdish vote, thus solidifying AKP hegemony and marginalizing the Kurdish movement.

On the other hand, the Kurdish side wanted to cement its hegemony in Northern Kurdistan and develop into a serious political alternative in the whole of Turkey with the legal, pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). It is clear which side was more successful in this.

As a consequence of the AKP government's lack of interest in genuinely pursuing the process — particularly after it more or less openly sided with the ISIS gangs against Rojava — the process was essentially dead. The AKP supported all sorts of jihadist groups in Syria in order to overthrow the Syrian government and keep the Kurdish forces in check.

When ISIS emerged as the dominant force in large parts of Syria and Iraq and began all-out attacks on Rojava, particularly Kobanê, Erdoğan must have felt that this was the moment this inconvenient and bothersome Kurdish autonomy directly at his southern border could be done away with.

Had Kobanê been erased within a few days, neither Turkey nor the US would have had to take a clear position. Erdoğan enraged most Kurds, even those not necessarily sympathizing with the PKK, when he sardonically stated that Kobanê had already fallen, even though the battle was still in its early phase. The White House also stated that Kobanê was not a strategic priority — rather strange, given that at the time the US was telling the world how heavily it was fighting ISIS, bombing some positions in Raqqa, while some 50 kilometers to the north ISIS was advancing towards the small border town with an enormous army.

The heroic resistance of the YPG/YPJ, and the massive protests in Turkey by Kurdish youth and the revolutionary left, forced international powers to take a clear stance. Eventually the US commenced with airstrikes and some minor weapon deliveries. For the YPG this was the "lesser evil" in a context in which "lesser evil" is a choice the powerful impose on the powerless. The cynicism of the US and Turkey's motives are now clear as the US government greenlights the destruction of the opposition within Turkey, and the bombing of the PKK and possibly Rojava as well.

Turkey, however, kept the border closed, which enraged the Kurdish movement even more, as many young Kurds were ready to cross the border and join the resistance. When a couple hundred Peshmerga from Southern Kurdistan (the Autonomous Region in Iraq [2]) were eventually allowed to

pass into Kobanê via Turkey — after pressure on Turkey from large swaths of its own population and international powers — it was too little too late to change the perspective most Kurds had of Erdoğan.

All while this was going on, the Turkish state and army never stopped building military roads, outposts, and dams that were meant to limit the movement of Kurdish armed forces. The guerrilla forces, on the other hand, withdrew the bulk of its forces to Northern Iraq (mostly to the Kandil Mountains, where the leadership is based and which are generally a safe haven for the PKK). This withdrawal took place despite the unwillingness of the government to create a legal framework for it.

Despite all this, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish movement went on the offensive and continued the negotiation process. On February 28, representatives of the HDP and the AKP government issued a joint statement in the Dolmabahçe Palace — a roadmap aimed at resolving the democratic deficits in Turkey and ending the PKK's armed struggle against the Turkish state. With this advance the Kurdish movement forced the AKP yet again to take a clear stance when it did not want to.

As the election drew nearer and Erdoğan was sensing his plans to change the constitution in his favor were in danger, and the negotiation process was not strengthening his AKP but the HDP, he changed course and effectively ended the process.

Just days after the agreement, he backtracked and declared that he did not recognize the accord. A few weeks later he topped that by saying that Turkey simply had no “Kurdish problem.” Around the same time Öcalan was isolated again on the prison island of Imralı, which means that no political representative, lawyer, or even relative was able to visit him. He remains isolated to this day.

### **Election Campaign: Target HDP**

Erdoğan had a clear aim for the parliamentary election in June 2015. The AKP was to gain at least 367 seats in order to have the capacity to change the constitution on their own. He wanted to introduce a specifically “Turkish” presidential system that was never defined clearly. France and the United States were referenced as models, but so was Saudi Arabia. Even among supporters and other political leaders in his own party, this idea was not particularly popular.

It became clear that only the HDP could prevent this self-coup from above, by crossing the 10 percent electoral threshold and winning parliamentary representation. The coup regime in 1982 had in fact established that threshold precisely to ensure that any democratic or left opposition could not gain a voice in parliament.

Because of that threat, Erdoğan openly declared the HDP the main target. This must be understood in a quite literal sense, as there were more than 150 attacks on the HDP recorded in the weeks leading up to the elections, including: fascist mobs attacking a HDP rally with the police idly watching in Erzurum; gunshots at various HDP offices; simultaneous bombs in HDP offices in Adana and Mersin, which by fortunately killed no one but left six people injured; the killing of Hamdullah Öge, who was driving a HDP campaign vehicle; and two bombs in a huge HDP rally in Amed/Diyarbakır two days before the election, which killed four and left scores more severely injured.

This massive assault was accompanied by the pool of media close to the AKP firing non-stop shots at the HDP and its charismatic co-leader, Selahattin Demirtaş. Erdoğan, all the while, was openly

breaching the constitution — which requires him to be nonpartisan as president — and even admitted that he used public money for his campaign tour. However, he called the people to vote for the presidential system, not for a specific party, even though at some rallies he was not as careful and the name of the party, which everyone knew anyway, slipped out.

Despite this enormous campaign of lies and physical violence, HDP supporters did not react to any of these provocations. They even tried to contain some clashes between the army and the PKK, as the army was getting more active again and attempting to induce attacks in order to diminish the HDP's support among non-Kurds in the west of Turkey.

All these provocations proved to be futile: the HDP easily crossed the threshold, gaining over 13 percent and 80 seats in parliament, while the AKP dropped to barely over 40 percent (from almost 50 percent) and won only 258 seats. This wasn't only a far shot from the majority necessary to impose constitutional changes without a referendum — it wasn't even an absolute majority. This meant that the period of one-party rule was over, and a coalition government would have to be formed.

Currently Turkey is ruled by an interim government, and if no coalition is formed by the end of August, another election will be held in autumn. It is absolutely clear that Erdoğan simply refuses to accept the results of the election. Yet in order to improve the AKP's chances in a possible snap election, the relations of power in Turkey have to shift massively in his favor — and that cannot be achieved simply with a vigorous campaign.

In other words, Erdoğan and the AKP are ready to start a war and force the country into a state of emergency in order to remain in power. There truly is no other way if they want to achieve this. And they desperately fear losing power, as all their unscrupulous crimes, corruption, police violence, and neoliberal assault on workers, would bring about, at the very least, lawsuits against the AKP's leading cadre and possibly even threaten their property and lives.

## **The Meaning of the Massacre**

The attack on the SGDF delegation in Suruç is an attack on Turkey's revolutionary left, which stands in solidarity with the Kurdish movement. The SGDF is the youth organization of the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP), a founding member of the HDP. The HDP co-leader, Figen Yüksekdağ, was previously the chairwoman of the ESP. This was not a random attack, and it was certainly not an attack on "Turkey." It was a heinous, targeted assault on the revolutionaries in Turkey and the Kurdish national liberation movement.

The Western media, however, has largely presented it in a different way: all the terror was now coming back to Turkey, as this was the first attack carried out by ISIS on Turkish soil. This is not true, as the bombs in Amed at the HDP rally were also planted by ISIS.

Furthermore, Suruç, only a few kilometers from the border and from Kobanê is under the close supervision of intelligence agencies. No one can move around there without knowledge of the Turkish secret service (MIT). Thus, within the Turkish and Kurdish left, the assumption that the MIT must have at least known of the attack is widespread. The further unfolding of events has shown this to be a plausible assumption.

What followed the massacre in Suruç developed so rapidly that one can hardly believe the Turkish state was not prepared. The police attacked almost all of the funeral processions of the victims of the massacre and detained several people.

The PKK and the urban guerrillas of the Kurdish youth, the YDG-H, responded and killed two policemen in Urfa whom they accused of having ties to ISIS. They also assassinated a major ISIS organizer in Istanbul, who was supposedly responsible for the recruitment of new fighters. The PKK officially states that the attacks in Urfa were carried out by local groups, not after a decision by the organization's leadership.

By accusing the PKK of having made a mistake with those reprisals, many liberal commentators who have some sympathy for the Kurdish movement and the HDP completely ignore the long history of repeated attacks, bombings, and repression by the Turkish state and fascist groups either supported or, at the very least, tolerated by the state. This is the continuation of a time-honored tradition among liberals of arguing that the Kurds should have more rights, but they should stop the armed struggle and become a completely legalistic movement.

What this position ignores is the fact that the Turkish state will not suddenly become "civilized" and "democratic" if the PKK simply stops its armed insurgency. This argumentation follows the logic of the state, which declares the violence and repression of the state, directly or indirectly, to be just self-defense. It is no surprise then that official US spokespeople support Turkey in its efforts against the PKK, referring to the right of "self-defense" (of the Turkish state of course).

One may discuss whether or not the armed response made sense tactically. However, the liberal line of argumentation goes like this: after the killings the Turkish state started airstrikes on PKK positions as a reaction, albeit an overblown one. The context in which this whole struggle takes place is thus completely ignored. Moreover, what is ignored by this line of argumentation is the fact that the rapid manner in which Turkey responded is highly suspect, and becomes more suspect still if one takes into account that the PKK repeatedly drew attention to increased aerial activity by Turkish reconnaissance aircraft in recent weeks.

## **War Against ISIS?**

The plans of the Turkish state to intervene in Syria have been well-known for some time now. Leaked documents proved that the MIT was pondering a false flag attack in order to establish a pretext for the war. Time and again suggestions for a "security zone" in northern Syria have been issued from Ankara, which, while varying in their scope, were obviously always directed against Rojava.

After his electoral defeat, Erdoğan suffered yet another defeat. The YPG/YPJ and their allies liberated Girê Spî/Tell Abyad from ISIS rule. This was a crucial triumph, probably more important from a military perspective than the defense of Kobanê. The line from Akçakale in Turkey over Girê Spî/Tell Abyad to Raqqa (the ISIS capital in Syria) was the route through which ISIS transported weapons, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and fighters. Furthermore, by taking Girê Spî/Tell Abyad, the YPG was able to unite the cantons of Kobanê and Cîzîre. The offensive is still ongoing, with great successes by the YPG, which is closing in on Raqqa.

But how did the Turkish government react? Let's recall that ISIS was in Girê Spî/Tell Abyad, close to the Turkish border, for over a year. The black flag was seen clearly from Turkish territory, and not a word of concern was raised by the government. Yet immediately after the YPG crushed ISIS in Girê Spî/Tell Abyad, there was an uproar throughout the AKP and its media.

They spread completely unfounded rumors about how the YPG carried out ethnic cleansing, and declared in large letters on the front pages that the Party of Democratic Union (PYD), the political party of the YPG, was more dangerous than ISIS. Of course, this is hardly surprising, as the tacit and

open support of the AKP government for ISIS is quite evident by now.

The AKP media did not stop there. Alongside the government they demanded an immediate military intervention, which was even rejected by the army leadership (presumably, as can be seen now, because they knew that the case for an intervention was very thin and something more serious was needed for that). Erdoğan topped it all off by declaring that he would never allow an independent Kurdish state to be formed in Syria (this despite the fact that the PYD does not declare this to be a goal), “no matter the cost.”

After the massacre in Suruç, the AKP completely escalated the situation. Soon after, there was another incident in the Turkish border town of Kilis that left one Turkish soldier and one ISIS member dead. In the face of all the other events, hardly anyone still talks about this incident. But it was used alongside the attack in Suruç as a pretext for Turkey’s presumed war against ISIS. Turkish jets struck a few ISIS targets, before they completely turned their bombs towards the PKK.

The coordination of all this with the United States and NATO is evident. In a NATO meeting on July 28 that Turkey called, NATO declared its full support for Turkey in this effort against terrorism. European Union and US spokespeople issued several statements declaring their full support in the war on “all forms of terrorism.”

The bombing of the PKK is conveniently left out of all these declarations, even though some European politicians urged Ankara to continue the negotiation process (which is, of course, completely meaningless by now). But the picture is quite clear: Turkey joined the war against ISIS to some degree and opened the Incirlik airbase for the US military. In turn, the US allowed Turkey to bomb the PKK, even though the YPG has proven to be a powerful force against ISIS.

Together with Turkey the US wants to establish this “security zone,” which should reach from Azaz to Jarablus along the Turkish border and almost down to Aleppo. Supposedly this includes a “no-fly-zone.” This gives even more indication of the operation’s real target.

The “security zone” covers precisely the land between the two cantons of Afrîn and Kobanê. A unification of those cantons would create a unified Rojava and was thus a chief aim of the YPG. At the same time, neither ISIS nor the YPG have aircrafts. Why then establish a no-fly-zone? Again, it is clear that this is aimed at the Assad government. Thus, we can conclude that this “security zone” might truly be a “security zone” for the *takfiri* groups in that it protects them from their main enemies, the YPG and the Syrian Arab Army and associated armed groups.

The official statements signal that Turkey seriously plans to relocate many of her two million Syrian refugees to that small zone. Also, together with the US, the “moderate rebels” (probably some milder right-wing forces) will be supported to get rid of ISIS.

However, not only in Kurdistan but across the whole country, the Turkish state began to openly demonstrate what its real aims were. Beginning on July 23, a wave of repression started with daily dawn raids. The police stormed apartments in cities all over the country in what was presented as a crackdown on ISIS structures. The numbers show otherwise. Initial reports showed that some 1,300 people were detained in the course of a few days, of which not even 150 were ISIS related — and many of the people associated with ISIS were quickly released without charges.

On the other hand, almost 900 members of the revolutionary left and the Kurdish movement were detained, many of them members of legal parties like the HDP. Police cracked down on protests and demonstrations all over the country, leaving many injured, and detained more people. In all this fury the police used everything from tear gas to rubber bullets to real ammunition, attacking

demonstrations and private apartments alike.

And there was more: in Gazi, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Istanbul, traditionally inhabited by many Alevi and Kurds and with a strong representation of revolutionary organizations, police killed Günay Özarlan, a member of the outlawed Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C). Police stated that she fired shots at them. However, reports found no proof of that. Fifteen police bullets were found in her body, bearing more resemblance to an execution than a shootout.

But even that was not enough — police prevented Özarlan's funeral from taking place for three whole days, prompting a response from revolutionary groups that led to days of intense street fighting and a state of emergency in Gazi. The friends and comrades of Özarlan wanted to lay her to rest in a Cemevi, an Alevi house of worship. Police drowned that Cemevi in tear gas, stormed and destroyed it, before finally allowing the funeral elsewhere.

This wave of repression and violence was accompanied by an attack on the media. Over one hundred news agencies and newspaper websites were banned, mostly those associated with the Kurdish movement or left politics.

This is hardly more than a footnote after everything that happened, but another piece in the puzzle of what the Turkish state attempted with this whole operation: reignite the war in Kurdistan and crack down on the Left in the whole country. This is quite simply Erdoğan's revenge for the electoral defeat and a violent attempt to cling to power.

## **Bombs for Kurdistan**

Looking at its media helps us understand the aims of the Turkish government. Soon after some ISIS positions were bombed, talk about ISIS declined significantly. Yes, there are daily bombing threats, presumably by ISIS as revenge acts, but the fact that none of these has so far caused any harm and the overall approach by the Turkish state raises suspicion as to whether this is mere political theater in order to keep story cooking.

For the media the real target was clear: "separatist terrorists," the PKK. Since last week attacks on PKK positions — mostly in northern Iraq, but also in southeastern Turkey — have been ongoing. The PKK and the YDG-H have responded in various ways to these attacks, carrying the war into major cities in Northern Kurdistan in Turkey. As of yet, however, their response has been rather restrained.

Last weekend, the Turkish army upped the ante once more when it "accidentally" shelled positions of Free Syrian Army groups allied with the YPG and injured four militants. There were minor incidents before and after that in which the Turkish army either crossed into Rojava or shelled something from across the border, suggesting this is low-intensity conflict for the moment.

Keeping in mind the protests in northern Kurdistan and Turkey when ISIS was attacking Kobanê, which left some fifty people dead, it is surely no exaggeration to suggest that Turkey will burn should the army dare to seriously attack Rojava.

## **What Next?**

There is a completely transparent background to this escalation: Erdoğan and the AKP are not accepting electoral defeat. They want revenge, and to create a state of emergency that will raise

their chances of winning a snap election in fall. The logic goes as follows: if there are soldiers and policemen dead at the PKK's hands, a nationalist wave will unite behind Erdoğan and grant him the majority he needs, while, separately, Turks who do not feel comfortable with the PKK will abandon the HDP again and thus push it under the threshold.

Or, even more directly: the AKP may close down the HDP, as some politicians of the openly fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) demand. For the moment, however, the main line seems to be to just try certain members of the party. Investigation reports for nine MPs of the HDP and the Republican People's Party (CHP), including their party chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have been sent to parliament. These provide the legal ground for starting investigations against elected MPs.

At the same time, a criminal investigation has been launched against both HDP co-chairs — Selahattin Demirtaş, whose clever and charismatic presentation gained many votes for the HDP, and Figen Yüksekdağ, who upset the authorities with her speech in Suruç on July 19, the third anniversary of the Rojava revolution. Demirtaş, on the other hand, is being tried for inciting violence with his call for protest when ISIS was storming Kobanê.

Already before the election the AKP repeatedly claimed that it was this call that made the Kurdish people take the streets and eventually led to fifty deaths. Thus, the AKP conveniently ignores that most of these fifty people died because of state violence. In any case, the direction is clear: crack down on left structures to secure a victory in a possible snap election, or form a (war) coalition with the fascist MHP.

The state's comprehensive assault and the obvious fact that Erdoğan is willing to risk war and chaos signal stormy times ahead. What the revolutionary and democratic forces in Turkey and Kurdistan need now are not abstract lectures about turning the other cheek, but full solidarity and offensive protests against the brutal and murderous politics of the Turkish state and NATO — particularly in countries like the United States and Germany.

**Max Zirngast**

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**P.S.**

\* "Erdoğan's Bloody Gambit". Jacobin. 8.3.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/turkey-nato-isis-hdp-kpp-suruc/>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/erdogan-turkey-parliament-consitutional-reform/>

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>