

After two years of de facto ceasefire, Turkey resumes its war against the Kurds

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After two years of de facto ceasefire, Turkey has resumed its aerial attacks against the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) fighters on its borders, but also launched a new wave of repression against the Kurdish population in the south east of the country. Phil Hearse asked Sarah Parker, a long time Kurdish solidarity activist, to explain.

Phil Hearse - Since July the Turkish president Recep Erdoğan has ordered his air force to launch a huge assault on Kurdish fighters in Iraq, resulting according to some reports to up to 200 deaths. Repression against the Kurdish population inside Turkey has been intensified. What lies behind this turn?

Sarah Parker - Since 2013 there had been a de facto ceasefire, and indeed the war had been been only intermittent since the late 90s, but the ceasefire was broken by Erdoğan and his Islamist AKP ('Justice and Development') party because of the outcome of the June general elections.

Erdoğan had been hoping to get an overall majority to amend the constitution to allow a more 'presidentialist' form of rule, giving him more power, but this was prevented by the rise of the HDP - the People's Democratic Party - which got 14% of the vote and 80 MPs. The HDP is an alliance based on supporters of Kurdish rights, leftist groups, women's organisations and other oppressed groups in Turkey such as Alevi, Armenians, and groups fighting for LGBTQ rights.

The HDP's 14% was an amazing result - for the first time a pro-Kurdish party got over the 10% barrier for parliamentary representation. The very high 10% threshold was deliberately designed to keep out pro-Kurdish and leftist parties.

Erdoğan was hoping not just for the AKP to return to power, but also a big majority to ensure greater presidential power, so he would have to pay even less attention to political opposition and civil society in general.

To try to reverse the defeat suffered by the AKP in June, a new election has been called for November and the AKP wants to relaunch strident Turkish nationalism to try to paint the HDP as linked to 'terrorism' to politically isolate it. This is not just on a propaganda basis - it includes organised pogrom-style attacks in many places, and more than 100 attacks on HDP buildings, presumably intended both to spread fear and impede election mobilisations.

Also it's possible that anti-terror legislation will be used directly against the HDP to harass its leaders and potentially to declare the HDP illegal. This is a high risk strategy by Erdoğan because clearly a big majority of the Turkish population want peace. Also the HDP continues to campaign for

peace, insisting that AKP return to the negotiating table, and working continually to build the peace movement.

The immediate excuse for re-launching the air war against 'terrorists' was the bombing of a left wing youth delegation at a press conference in the town of Suruç in July this year, on the Syrian border, in which 33 people were killed and more than 100 injured.

People mainly blamed ISIS since the group of young socialists had been planning to cross into Kobani to spend a few days assisting with rebuilding work. But many observers believe Turkish intelligence agencies were involved, creating the public outrage to enable the AKP to launch the air attacks on 'terrorism'.

In early September there were ten days of clashes in the city of Cizre in which more than 30 people were killed. The government used tanks and snipers to attack the population. Clashes have also taken place in Diyarbakir and other cities in Turkish Kurdistan. What explains this?

Cizre is a town with a very militant history [1]. It's right down in the south east corner of Kurdistan Turkey on the Syrian border where the Kurdish movement has been strong in the past, and just over the border from Derik, one of the centres of resistance in Rojava ("West", i.e. Western Kurdistan/Syrian Kurdistan). What seems to have happened is a kind of urban uprising, especially led by the youth but not only them, women are also very important, against the return to war and the continuing repression.

Despite the drawn out peace process and ceasefire, repression has continued against the Kurdish population, especially the arrest of thousands of political activists, students, Kurdish language rights activists, local government representatives and so on. Thousands of political prisoners are kept in general in very harsh conditions.

The local people obviously decided to resist the coming assault and you can see from film footage and photos of the events that this was a real mass mobilisation.

The response by the Turkish military was ferocious: the destruction looks like something out of Gaza or Syria. One particularly horrible aspect of it was army snipers shooting down men, women and children who went out during the curfew to look for food or water.

A similar kind of conflict happened in the biggest Kurdish city in south east Turkey, Diyarbakir. It's a bit early to say what this means in terms of the tactics of the Kurdish resistance; but the magazine Business Insider (owned by Google) claims there is a turn to challenging the Turkish state through an urban-based struggle, especially led by the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), a kind of youth militia linked to the PKK.

Business Insider also claims that the Turkish government is panicked by this turn of events and doesn't know how to deal with it. Mass destruction in the cities would play very badly internationally. [2]. This claim is probably roughly right - as the article states, previous serious fighting has been mainly in the countryside, so that is presumably what the army were trained to confront, not urban fighting. The Turkish army and police seem to be taking quite heavy losses in the retaliatory actions by the PKK (in response to the Suruc massacre and killings of Kurdish civilians or guerrillas) at the moment, and there is certainly a question over how far the generals are willing to engage in a renewed war, or how far the soldiers are motivated or prepared to fight.

The PKK leadership have said that so far their forces are only engaged in self-defence and retaliation

for specific atrocities, and have by no means fully engaged in war yet, and that they still want peace, not war; the war has been restarted by the AKP.

At the end of last year the Kurds were being hailed internationally as the one force that had stood up to ISIS, and successfully resisted them, in northern Iraq. Even American Secretary of State, John Kerry praised them: and it seems likely there was some co-ordination between the Syrian-Kurdish YPG (Peoples Protection Units), closely linked to the PKK, and American air forces bombing ISIS in the battle to defend Kobani. But at the end of July, Turkey hosted a special NATO conference which gave the green light for Erdoğan to launch his bombing offensive against the Kurds. What changed?

It's hard to know American thinking from the outside, but I guess they are playing a cynical game and moved in response to pressure from Turkey. On the one hand, the US probably doesn't want ISIS to get too out of hand, and wants to be able to keep as much Kurdish goodwill as possible so as to retain Kurdistan as a base in the otherwise mostly hostile Middle East; but on the other hand Turkey is a NATO member, who they seem reluctant to restrain.

At one level there is a practical deal. The NATO conference gave the go-ahead for Turkey to attack 'terrorists' in Syria and Iraq, with the strong implication that this meant mainly so-called Islamic State. Of course it meant mainly the PKK and its allies in the YPG, and the Americans must have known that. In return the United States military have been given the right to use the Turkish base of Incirlik for their own attacks on ISIS, something that Turkey had previously refused to allow.

Actually John Kerry didn't praise the YPG, he congratulated the 'peshmergas'. PKK and YPG don't refer to themselves as peshmergas and this is more often used in relation to the fighters of Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party. This is a reflection of the preference for Barzani as a client, over any sort of real self-rule by the emerging Kurdish entity.

Barzani shares control of the Kurdish enclave in Iraq with the leaders of the PUK, Gorran, (an offshoot of the PUK which has campaigned on a reform platform) and a couple of Islamist parties. He is Britain and America's favourite Kurdish leader, and his fighters have incidentally shown themselves absolutely useless in fighting ISIS. Peshmerga is a term also used for the fighters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The YPG were the main defenders of Kobani, and many of the fighters were women, who are increasingly to the fore in the Kurdish revolutionary process.

Towards the end, a small number of PUK and KDP fighters equipped with heavy weapons needed to combat tanks were reluctantly allowed through Turkey and into Kobani as reinforcements, after a massive public campaign. Kobani was a battle that took months and saw heavy Kurdish casualties while the Turkish troops a few miles away sat on their hands and did nothing to stop the flow of ISIS personnel and supplies into the area - indeed there is considerable evidence that they facilitated ISIS movements.

At present there is still a blockade by Turkey against the movement of building equipment and medical supplies into Kobani, so things still have to be smuggled in or brought in on the 120 mile journey over poor roads from Iraq. One of the main demands from Rojava is for the opening of a humanitarian corridor through Turkey into Kobani.

A recent press release from the authorities working on the rebuilding of Rojava said that so far no promises have been made good from the reconstruction conference held under the auspices of the EU a few weeks ago, so clearly more pressure is needed. People in Europe need to realise that Kobani is still relying heavily on the efforts of the local people and the solidarity movement, and will be under threat of one sort or another for the foreseeable future.

The YPG and PKK were also responsible for rescuing several thousand Yazidis from from ISIS when they attacked Shengal in summer 2014, so NATO agreeing to the onslaught against the Kurdish resistance in Turkey and in their camps in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan southwest of Turkey, in the name of the fight against 'terrorism' is utterly cynical.

Among the NATO powers only the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, raised objections to the assault on the Kurds. The British government of course still classifies the PKK as a terrorist organisation - no change there, and indeed a young Kurdish woman called Shilan has been in jail in Britain for some months and is awaiting trial on PKK related charges, allegedly because she went to Germany and was heading for Syria in order to join the PKK to fight ISIS (!) [3]

The Americans also carried out some airstrikes in support of the defence of Kobani and of the YPG / PKK push to link up the Kurdish 'cantons' of Kobani and Jazireh (contiguous with the Syria-Iraqi Kurdistan border). Both these areas are in Syria but are also on the Turkish border, south of areas of Kurdistan Turkey where the Kurdish movement is strong like Cizre, so this area is strategically important to the Turkish state. It is hard to know why the US did this; perhaps it began partly as a response to the global movement in solidarity with Kobani - they would have looked stupid if they had let Kobani fall when everyone knew they had planes in the area and were supposedly in an all-out war against ISIS.

Their further support for the Kurdish push to link the cantons and defend them against ISIS must be done either, again, to reduce ISIS strength in the area, or to increase the potential for building up the Kurdish entity, or in connexion with their plans for the management of Syria per se - it is hard to know which factors are most important.

It may also be that there is something deeper going on here. Isis provides an excuse for constant American intervention in Iraq and the surrounding area. I think they see Isis as sometimes a 'useful' enemy and maybe they want a kind of controlled chaos. Probably at least the Americans don't want ISIS to get too much out of control and are prepared from time to time to make tactical alliances even with the YPG.

It is important to note that the linking of the cantons of Rojava and the declaration by something like 15 Kurdish areas in Turkey of autonomous self-government are connected - both represent an attempt by the Kurdish movement to take new steps on the road to emancipation. It's in this context that we should understand the Turkish demand to create a 'buffer zone' in northern Syria - it's a plan to create a zone under Turkish/Western control and prevent the consolidation of a self-governing Kurdish strip on its border.

So now in return for Western support for its aerial onslaught on the PKK leadership in Kandil, the AKP leadership is forced to curb its hostility to the US attacking Isis from Turkish territory?

Yes. You will remember Turkey refused the Americans use of their base at Incirlik during the Gulf war and refused to allow a northern land route to attack Iraq.

The Americans have been negotiating with the Turkish government on the issue of using Turkish bases to attack ISIS for about a year. It's completely improbable that the American intelligence agencies don't know about the links between Erdoğan's government and ISIS. Certainly for a couple of years the Turkish government has been allowing fighters and equipment to go over its land borders to ISIS.

There is also evidence of links (MIT documents found on ISIS corpses and so on) between Turkish

intelligence agencies and ISIS. So it's a big change for them to allow the US to use bases in Turkey to attack ISIS. But obviously they hope this will be outweighed by damage to the PKK leadership.

However there is definitely some tension between Turkey and the US over control of North Syria. We should also not ignore concerns such as access to oil, gas, and the sea . [4] Chauvinism and the caliphate aside, there is clearly tension amongst the regional powers around control of northern Syria - an autonomous largely Kurdish zone from Iraqi Kurdistan to Afrin would come very near to cutting Turkey off from the Mediterranean sea, and would also mean that oil or gas could be exported from Iraq or further east without going through Turkey.

This would be a strategic disaster for the Turkish state. The same could be true if the western powers were able to neutralise the self-organisation in Rojava and the PKK in Turkey, and to run a puppet Kurdish state through their favoured clients, the Barzani clan.

So it is easy to see why there is a lot of tension over who controls Northern Syria, whether or not Assad is able to cling on in the west around Latakia for any length of time. Incidentally, some commentators think that Britain is closer to Turkey and Barzani even than the US is, because of its historic role in the area, and its involvement in shady oil dealings. The recent investigative article by Nafeez Ahmed is a good way into this subject . [5]

So Erdoğan has been prepared to tear up the peace process with the PKK in order to create an atmosphere of crisis and build up Turkish nationalism, presumably in the hope now that the November elections will get him the majority he wants, and marginalise the HDP. But what was it that led the AKP's electoral setback. How important was the Gezi Park movement in 2013-14?

You have to see the two interlinked sides of the AKP government. It's a corrupt, bourgeois, neo-liberal government, but also stridently Islamist, linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups throughout the region. Protests against Erdoğan grew because of both aspects of the government.

The Gezi Park movement was a battle against part of the gentrification of Istanbul, but supporting protests and strikes took place across Turkey protesting a wide range of concerns, at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, of expression, assembly, and the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism. Alongside the left and popular organisations, the environmental movement was part of the Gezi protests. And of course many young people are just fed up with the Islamist threat to their freedoms - to dress how they want, to listen to the music they want, to drink in bars etc.

The gentrification aimed at privatising public spaces and destroying poor communities for luxury developments shows the uneven distribution of the wealth generated by Turkey's economic boom in the last 10 years. Yes there is a significant and affluent middle class, but there is also mass poverty and resentment. An interesting aspect of the Gezi Park movement, like most protests in Turkey, was the massive involvement of youth - the Turkish left has a much younger profile than the left in many European countries.

The corruption and authoritarianism was highlighted by the Soma mining disaster in 2014. Three hundred and eleven miners were killed at a hugely unsafe mine whose owners had links with the government. Outrage was directed at the government because the AKP government forced through privatization, deregulation and wage reductions in order to keep Turkey's mines profitable and attractive to Western capital. As part of this strategy, costs are reduced by loosening safety procedures, creating 'flexible' work conditions, lowering the standards for training, and

subcontracting unskilled or even unregistered under-age workers.

When Erdoğan visited the mine he had to take refuge from relatives protestors shouting 'murderer' and 'thief'. In the mêlée one of Erdoğan's aides kicked a demonstrator on the ground, a graphic symbol of the attitude of the government to the masses.

But the other, Islamist, side of the AKP government is also important. When the Caliphate last existed in the form of the Ottoman Empire, its headquarters was Istanbul. I think Erdoğan wants to be the leader of the region's Sunni Muslims, creating in effect a new Caliphate.

To do that of course he has to get rid of the secular traditions of the Turkish state embodied in the ideology of Kemalism, an authoritarian bourgeois nationalist ideology, after Kemal Atatürk and the Young Turk movement that created the modern Turkish state in 1923-4. Erdoğan has been trying to get rid of traditional 'Kemalist' figures in the leadership of the army, the police and the judiciary.

To what extent the AKP have been successful in purging the top ranks of the state apparatus remains to be seen. The Turkish army is very powerful, and it seems there is little appetite in its top ranks for a new war against the Kurds. You can never rule out the possibility of a military coup.

Overall the Kurdish question remains a central one for the Turkish ruling class and for the future of the AKP government. The Kurdish leadership has pushed the peace process very hard, even in the face of setbacks and disappointments, but the Turkish government has done very little - other than some minor concessions on language and broadcasting - to resolve Kurdish national demands. This is another major reason for the HDP success in the election - the AKP lost a lot of conservative Kurdish votes because of failure to deliver in terms of resolving the Kurdish question, Erdoğan's real attitude being summed up by his notorious prediction "Kobani will fall!".

There has never been any real sign that the AKP intended to make significant concessions, not even a guarantee that with peace would come the release of the prisoners or the reintegration of the Kurdish leadership from the mountains into civil society.

While even mainstream media is expressing some concern at Erdoğan's policies, there is no sign of any diplomatic reaction from the British state, in other words they probably intend essentially to keep supporting Turkey politically. Much alternative media in Turkey gets shut down, especially in the east in Kurdistan, and even in Europe pro-Kurdish websites are hacked and harassed a lot at the moment, so we need to be actively seeking out information and joining the various solidarity campaigns and demonstrations where we can - the joint Kurdish youth and Campaign Against Arms Trade demonstrations at the arms fair in London in September, where Turkey was the guest of honour, was a good example of the work that can be done.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/sec...>

[2] <http://uk.businessinsider.com/turke...>

[3] <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com...>

[4] Thanks to Bestun Baban for his discussion of these geo-strategic aspects.

[5] medium.com/insurge-intelligence/bri...