

LATEST CRACKDOWN MEASURES AGAINST PKK AND IS REVEAL THE SECURITY PRIORITIES FOR THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT

*By Foteini Fragkou,
research intern*

The latest operations against IS terrorists and members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) reveal the Turkish government's priorities in its efforts to secure the country. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and President Erdogan have demonstrated through their policy towards the PKK and IS that they perceive these 2 groups to be the country's main security threats. Even before the November 1 national elections, the AKP introduced a hardline policy towards the PKK and IS. After the AKP won the parliamentary majority in the elections, it announced that its efforts would intensify.

Despite the growing power of the Islamic State in neighboring Syria and Iraq, until recently the Turkish government only viewed the Kurdish PKK insurgents and members of the Marxist Revolutionary People's Liberation Party Front (DHKP-C) as security threats. Though Abdullah Ocalan, one of the founding members and leader of the PKK, announced a ceasefire in March 2013, clashes between security forces and PKK fighters and sporadic PKK attacks continue. While PKK fighters have mostly been involved in guerilla-style incidents and attacks against priority targeted security troops, the DHKP-C carried out a series of important attacks against high-profile targets. Most notably, the DHKP-C took prosecutor Mehmet Selim Kiraz hostage on March 31 in Istanbul's Çaglayan courthouse. At the time, Kiraz was overseeing the case of Berkin Elvan, a teenager who died after 269 days in a coma due to injuries sustained during a police crackdown on the Gezi Park protests.

Until June, the government's attitude to the Islamic State could be described as relatively 'neutral,' despite the fact that IS represents one of the most important terrorist groups in recent years and acts near Turkey's borders. Furthermore, today Turkey represents the most important transfer hubs for jihadists from across the worlds who intend to join the group. Not only did Turkish forces not participate in any operation against IS, but Turkey also did not allow U.S.-led coalition forces to use its Incirlik base to conduct air operations against the terrorist group. NATO allies,

Kurdish politicians and opponents of Erdogan expressed concern about the government's lack of commitment to the fight against IS and its role in allowing jihadists to use Turkey as a logistical base in their fight against the Assad regime. Indeed, today IS represents a "useful enemy" for Turkey, a "useful monster" or an "ally", as the group fights against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Shiite Iraqi government backed by Iran.

On July 20 a suicide attack in Turkey motivated a shift in Turkish policy towards the Islamic State and the PKK, resulting in the launch of several military ground and air operations against the 2 groups. To recall, 32 people were killed and more than 100 were injured when a suicide bomber targeted a student gathering led by the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations. The students were making plans to help rebuild the Syrian town of Kobane, which lies opposite Suruc and was the scene of fierce battles between Kurdish groups and IS. Turkish authorities initially said that a female bomber had carried out the attack but on July 22 they revealed that the perpetrator was a 20-year-old Turkish man, identified by the initials S.A.A., who had traveled to Syria the year before with the help of a group linked to IS. Although Turkish authorities blamed IS for the attack, the terrorist group has not yet officially claimed responsibility. This attack was perceived as IS's most serious terrorist act inside Turkey's borders at that point.

On July 22, 2 police officers were found dead with gunshot wounds in the Ceylanpinar district of the Sanliurfa province, near Turkey's border with Syria. Members of the PKK claimed responsibility for the killings, saying that the attack represented retaliation against the suicide bombing in Suruc, as the 2 officers were "collaborating" with Islamic State terrorists. Although it never blamed the PKK for the suicide attack, the Turkish government used the 2 officers' deaths as an opportunity to begin operations not only against IS but also against the PKK. The officers' murder, which was followed by a series of clashes with security forces, allowed the AKP to abandon peace negotiations and start publicly targeting Kurdish rebels.

Tensions intensified further between PKK insurgents and Turkish forces in July. The government increased military activity against the PKK, breaking the ceasefire declared in 2013 and launching a new wave of unrest. At the same time Turkey started a crackdown against IS which was often used as a stepping stone for further attacks against Kurdish forces outside Turkish borders. On July 24, Turkish fighter jets conducted attacks against PKK camps in Qandil, northern Iraq, and Turkish warplanes simultaneously targeted IS positions in Syria. The same day, Turkey decided to let U.S.-led coalition forces to use the Incirlik air base to conduct operations against the Islamic State. The government also intensified its operations against the group in and outside the country. On September 8, Turkish ground forces crossed into Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish rebels for the first time since the ceasefire due to a "short-time" operation. Many observers remarked that a crackdown that initially

targeted IS after the Suruc attack was increasingly shifting its focus towards PKK fighters.

The intensified offensive against the PKK could also be explained by the fact that the insurgent attacks not only gave the Turkish president the chance to fight terrorism within the country but also to damage the AKP's political "rival", the People's Democratic Party (HDP). To recall, in the June 7 elections, the HDP passed the 10-percent vote threshold to enter parliament for the first time after receiving 13.1 percent of the vote and 79 seats. This historic victory for the pro-Kurdish movement cost the AKP its ruling majority. Furthermore, with the victories of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, an alarming possibility arose: the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria that could serve as a precedent for Kurds with similar aspirations in Turkey. Turkish government policy towards the PKK sought to minimize the popularity of the Kurdish group and its political and military status won from gains over IS ahead of the national elections that would take place on November 1.

Since July, hundreds of suspected PKK and IS insurgents have been arrested, clearly indicating that the government is prioritizing the fight against the PKK over IS. And although the actions of Turkish officials seemed to have discouraged terrorist threats, another attack soon took place that highlighted the country's security vulnerabilities.

On October 10, 102 people were killed and more than 400 were injured when 2 suicide bombers attacked a rally organized by labor unions and a number of NGOs to protest the conflict between state authorities and PKK members. The attack, the worst ever on Turkish soil, took place outside a train station in Ankara. Authorities immediately suggested that Kurdish rebels or IS were responsible for the explosions. On October 12 the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu suggested in an interview on NTV that IS was the prime suspect in investigations into the attack. Indeed, according to many security sources, the attack bears similarities to the suicide bombing that took place earlier in Suruc. On the afternoon of the same day, the PKK said it would suspend attacks and declared a "state of inactivity" ahead of the elections. According to a statement from the Kurdistan Communities Union - an umbrella organization that includes civil society organizations and political parties, including the PKK - "heeding calls from Turkey and abroad, our movement has decided on a state of inactivity by our guerrillas, unless our people and our guerrilla forces are attacked".

Meanwhile, directly following the attack Turkish air forces launched a new round of strikes against rebel positions in Iraq. On October 22, President Tayyip Erdogan said that IS terrorists had worked with Syrian intelligence services and the Syrian Kurdish PYD to carry out the Ankara bombing. It has been suggested that President Erdogan was using this opportunity to highlight the efforts of his party, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), to combat terrorism and to play the security card in order to win the nationalistic vote and raise suspicion about the main pro-Kurdish party. The results of the November elections, which gave the majority to the AKP, showed

that the Sunni electorate held the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) accountable for presumed links to the PKK and the Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H).

After the AKP's victory, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared on November 4 that Turkey would continue military operations against the PKK "without interruption in winter conditions". The same day, Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioglu expressed the country's determination to continue fighting against IS. **According to Sinirlioglu, "military action is planned for the following days" and "although IS advance has been checked with the support of the international effort which we are part, the threat is far from over" as the group has "threatened our security".**

Although the Turkish government is likely to become more engaged in the fight against IS not only due to the actual threat the group poses to the country but also in order to maintain international support, there are still a series of threats challenging the country.

First, the AKP has to address the weakness the country faces by fighting too many enemies simultaneously. Turkish forces are conducting operations against both the PKK and IS not only within the country, but also in Iraq and in Syria. Despite the government's large-scale operations and apparent military successes, the situation underlines a serious security problem.

Another challenge to the security of the country is the polarization created from months of fighting with Kurdish rebels. The conflict between the 2 sides has increasingly involved the general public and exacerbated existing divisions. Supporters of the Turkish government and pro-Kurdish supporters have become more fanatical and fuelled the escalation of the conflict on both sides. The increase of social and political tensions threatens to destabilize the country further in the near future.

A third threat the country faces is the risk of further attacks by IS or other radical Islamist groups in retaliation for its latest military operations. After the July attack and the government's consequent offensive, terrorists were able to carry out an even deadlier attack in the heart of the country even though Turkey had boosted security measures. It is thus very likely that after this new round of military operations terrorists may destabilize the country with another attack.

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