

Turkey's war against the Kurds threatens to create turmoil both inside and outside the country

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Turkey has carried out military operations against Islamic State (IS) and the Kurdish PKK following a suicide bombing in the Turkish town of Suruc in July. [Esra Özyürek](#) writes that by targeting Kurdish guerrillas, the Turkish government is essentially undermining the only effective force that can combat IS. She argues that Turkey's decision to attack Kurdish forces is directly linked to internal political developments within the country, and that the conflict threatens to damage the interests of both Kurds and Turks.



Turkey recently agreed to participate in the war against Islamic State (IS). The next day observers were surprised to find that Turkish armed forces were most concerned with targeting the Kurdish forces inside and outside Turkey, the only effective counter to IS. How can we explain Turkey's sudden willingness to participate in the war against IS and its decision to attack Kurdish forces?

Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP), which lost its majority rule in elections in June, but still governs the country due to the lack of a coalition agreement, has several conflicting interests. Outside Turkey, Erdoğan and the AKP adamantly oppose the Assad regime. They also see the establishment of independent Kurdish territories in Syria as being against Turkish interests. IS forces are currently fighting against the Assad regime and Kurdish forces. Furthermore, IS propagates a form of Sunni dominance in the Middle East. Even though the political basis of the AKP is far removed from the jihadism of IS, the AKP and IS nevertheless share an interest in Sunni dominancy. This contrasts with the Assad regime, which is associated with the [Alawite](#) religious group, and the socialism that is strong among Kurdish forces.

This is why Turkey has been reluctant to join the fight against IS, despite pressure from the country's western allies. There have been serious allegations and evidence of Turkish support for IS. Turkey has turned a blind eye to militants, money and weapons passing through to Syria. It is reported that there are more than 1,000 IS militants currently in Turkey and it has even emerged that National Intelligence Agency (MIT) lorries have carried weapons to IS.

Within Turkey, the AKP has had to rely on Kurdish support in return for transforming the decades long pattern of domination and violence between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens. The AKP has approached Kurds within Turkey under the framework of Muslim brotherhood, rather than Turkish nationalism. The government has invested resources in the Kurdish region and granted some basic freedoms. As a response, the guerrilla forces of the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK) initiated peace negotiations, pledging to give up armed struggle and continue their political struggle on a legitimate basis. During this period Kurdish voters backed the AKP, contributing to the party's sustained electoral success since the early 2000s.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Credit: World Economic Forum (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

This extended honeymoon between Kurds and the Turkish state came to an end last summer when a left-wing pro-Kurdish party, the [People's Democratic Party \(HDP\)](#), began to gain popularity among Kurds and liberal-left Turks. With polls showing that Kurds intended to back the HDP in the 2015 elections and that the party would be able to pass the country's 10 per cent electoral threshold, Erdoğan distanced himself from the peace process. The HDP ultimately proved to be even more popular than predicted, securing 13 per cent of the votes.

The HDP's success contributed to the AKP losing its parliamentary majority for the first time in a decade, with the party only securing 41 per cent of the vote. The lack of a majority has undermined Erdoğan's hopes of altering the country's constitution to assign greater powers to the office of President, transforming it from a largely symbolic role to an executive function with the final say on political matters. Such a consolidation of power would also make sure that his family and the families of his ministers would not be charged over serious corruption allegations that surfaced about a year and a half ago.

However an unexpected act of violence triggered a sudden change in these internal and external dynamics. Shortly after the election members of a socialist youth group affiliated with the HDP organised a humanitarian mission to Kobani – the Kurdish controlled town in Syria, which Kurdish forces had recently liberated from IS. The group faced challenges in getting the necessary permission and were followed closely at every step of their journey by MIT.

At the Turkish border town of Suruc, a male suicide bomber dressed as a woman [killed](#) 33 of these young men and women as they were holding a press conference. The suicide bomber was a Turkish citizen who had ties to IS. HDP leaders, who were themselves the target of a bombing during their final election rally, declared that they hold the Turkish state responsible for the killings because the youths were under close scrutiny at every step of their journey. The murdered young men and women were the likely future leaders of the HDP.

Shortly after the killings, Erdoğan had a phone conversation with President Obama, where Turkey agreed to open the Incirlik Air Base to the US Air Force and to take part in the war against IS. However, the very next day, it became clear that Turkey was attacking Kurdish forces more heavily than IS, whose representatives even claimed that Turkey was hitting only unoccupied buildings. Turkey declared that ongoing peace negotiations with the PKK were over. The next day a series of operations started in Turkey, with more than 1,000 people being detained.

Of those, over 800 were linked to the HDP and PKK and about only 100 to IS (the rest were affiliated with various other extremist and anarchist organisations). When the PKK responded to the attacks by assassinating police and soldiers, the 30 year war between the Kurdish guerrillas and the Turkish army was rekindled. Independent journalists and individual citizens are now reporting that many Kurdish towns are already full on war zones. AKP representatives have claimed links between the HDP and the PKK and have threatened to remove the parliamentary immunity of HDP leaders.

A full on war may now determine who will rule in Turkey. With no coalition emerging since the election in June, Erdoğan has the authority to call for early elections. AKP representatives have expressed a desire for early elections, where they may this time manage to consolidate their power and gain enough support to alter the constitution. To achieve this goal they have now increasingly turned toward Turkish nationalism in their rhetoric, while seeking to delegitimise the HDP. Both strategies become possible when there is an active war taking place between the Turkish state and Kurdish guerrillas.

Turkey might have opened up its air bases to US forces for use against IS, but the shift in Turkish policy has a dark side, closely related to internal developments. Turkish forces are not only attacking the only effective forces that can defeat IS, but are also restarting a three decades long conflict within the country's own borders that has already killed 40,000 Turkish citizens. The only certainties from this development are that Turkey has once again become the site of a bloody conflict, that Kurds stand to lose basic freedoms they have won over the last ten years, that Turkey's already tarnished democracy will be further eroded, and that that the wider turmoil in the Middle East will continue to expand and deepen over the coming months and years.

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