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Turkey's War Against the Kurds

By Vijay Prashad
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A war of words has broken out between the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the leader of the left-wing People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtas. Mr. Demirtas, who is Kurdish, leads a party that unites the Kurdish nationalist forces and Turkey's left-wing groups. Until recently, he and the HDP have called for more rights for the Kurdish population within Turkey rather than for the creation of a Kurdish state out of Turkey. The Kurds in Turkey are spread out across the country, with Istanbul having the largest concentration (one million Kurds). Nonetheless, the majority of the Kurdish population lives in the country's south-east, which has been the epicentre of demands for self-determination. In late December, Mr. Demirtas backed a resolution passed by the Kurdish Democratic Society Congress (DTK), which reiterated an old demand for the creation of Kurdish "autonomous regions" and "self-governance bodies". Mr. Erdogan called Mr. Demirtas' action "treason".

Mr. Demirtas, who has a calm and careful political demeanour, has come to this position from great desperation. Out of the gaze of the international media, Turkey's government has been prosecuting a violent war against the Kurdish people. From last summer, Turkey began a policy of military curfews and severe crackdowns on the Kurdish towns and cities of south-eastern Turkey. Turkish tanks have been shelling Cizre, near the Syrian border, and military operations in Diyarbakir and Silopi escalate each day. The region, say local journalists, resembles a war zone. Mr. Erdogan has called this violence a "fight against separatist terror organisations". Diyarbakir mayor Gultan Kisanak said, "Tanks and heavy weaponry, which are only used in conventional warfare, are being used by the Turkish armed forces, in areas where hundreds of thousands of civilians live." Ms. Kisanak, a former political prisoner and a very popular politician, bravely stood up as an MP against the murder of 34 Kurdish civilians by the Turkish air force in the 2011 Roboski Massacre. She does not mince words, nor does she exaggerate.

Peace talks

Since 2013, the main military wing of the Kurdish resistance — the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — has been in talks with the Turkish state for a full peace agreement. The PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, has been in Imrali Prison since 1999. The dialogue between the state and the PKK was called the Imrali process, after the name of the island where Mr. Ocalan's prison is based. Negotiations based on a 10-point Dolmabahce Agreement proceeded until this summer, when Mr. Erdogan restarted his belligerent talk. He rejected as implausible negotiations between the PKK — a "terrorist organisation," he called it — and the government. He tied the HDP to the PKK. The HDP responded that it has no "organic" ties to the PKK, although many former guerrillas are now above ground inside the HDP. The President rejected the HDP's claim at his Ramzan speech at a mosque in Istanbul's suburban Atasehir district. He said that the HDP and the PKK have an "inorganic tie". He wanted war against not only the PKK, an armed force, but also against the HDP, a respected parliamentary party. Both had to be dented.

Why has Mr. Erdogan been so eager to go to war against the HDP and the PKK? There are two reasons: first, the HDP's political successes have prevented his political ambitions, and second, the PKK's assistance to the Syrian Kurds had raised the spectre once more of Kurdish statehood or autonomy.

The rise of the HDP inside Turkey dented Mr. Erdogan's personal ambitions to shift the Turkish political process from parliamentary to presidential rule. Mr. Erdogan bizarrely cited Hitler's Germany as an example of a successful presidential system. Victories of the HDP in both parliamentary elections of 2015 prevented Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) from earning an absolute majority in Parliament, which would have delivered power to change the system. Mr. Erdogan's war against the HDP and the media emerges from political frustration. His attempt to link the HDP to the PKK was designed to frighten its support base. Assassinations and arrests of pro-HDP politicians and journalists began in earnest. The killing of human rights attorney Tahir Elci in late November last year had a chilling effect. It also drew from Mr. Demirtas this sentiment: "What killed Tahir was not the state, but statelessness." Loss of faith in Turkey's commitment to its minority and to multi-party democracy led influential people like Mr. Demirtas to reconsider autonomy and self-government of the Kurdish areas.

Creation of People's Protection Units

Much of the explanation for the assault on the Kurds is to be found in Turkey's failed policy in Syria. Battle-hardened PKK fighters turned to help the Syrian Kurdish fighters in 2011, after the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad withdrew from Syria's Kurdish regions in the north. The outcome of this assistance was the creation of the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG and the PKK have been fierce fighters against the Islamic State (IS), since it entered the area in 2012. The battlefield advances of the Syrian Kurds with the PKK have lifted their morale, gained them international attention, and won them adherents amongst Turkey's non-Kurdish population. It is the ferocity of their fighting and their progressive social policy that gave buoyancy to the HDP in the recent elections. Declaration of Syrian Kurdish autonomy alongside Iraqi Kurdish autonomy (since 1991) put pressure on Turkey's Kurds to follow suit. This was precisely what Mr. Erdogan and the Turkish ultra-nationalists despise.

Since October, the Turkish armed forces have hit not only the Kurdish cities in south-eastern Turkey but also PKK and YPG combatants inside Syria. PKK leader Cemil Bayik accused the Turkish state of attacking the PKK to "stop the Kurdish advance against ISIS". This is an accusation that has become commonplace in the region — that the AKP is implicated in the establishment of IS. Turkey's border with Syria is porous for entry of IS *jihadis* and for IS oil. The latter draws in Mr. Erdogan's son Bilal, who is a director in the BMZ group that has played a role in the trans-shipment of IS oil to Malta, and then to Israel. Mr. Bayik's point is strongly made but what evidence exists supports his assertion. Turkey's ambivalence towards IS also bedevils the U.S., which uses the Turkish base at Incirlik to bomb IS, and watches Turkish craft attack the Kurdish forces who are the main ground troops against the IS.

Turkey is in danger of a civil war, as Mr. Demirtas warned in September. Mr. Erdogan believes that he can ride the tiger of the anti-Kurdish war. It is more likely that he will lose control of the situation and plunge Turkey into irreparable damage. The Turkish government believes it can score a military victory against the PKK, which is why it has been striking PKK camps inside Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Before the PKK can be destroyed, the Turkish forces will have to raze the cities and towns of south-eastern Turkey. They are on the road to doing this — with little international condemnation of their actions.