

Turkey in a Time of War

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Introduction

Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record.

I last appeared before this subcommittee in July 2014 to speak about the future of Turkish democracy. In that testimony, I described how the government led by then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had pursued an aggressive, society-wide crackdown on dissent in response first to the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 and then in response to the opening of corruption cases implicating the government in December 2013.

Since the time of that testimony, the situation for democracy and for freedom of expression in Turkey has grown even more dire. Much of this is because of the government's return to open conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in July 2015. Since that time, the return to conflict with the PKK has resulted in the deaths of at least 230 civilians and 230 Turkish security forces, while the president claims the state has killed 3000 PKK militants. Also since July, the Islamic State's suicide bombers have killed another 135 Turkish civilians, as well as 11 foreign visitors to Istanbul just three weeks ago.

The conflict is taking a devastating toll on Turkey's civilians. It is destroying a decade of progress on relations with the Kurdish minority inside Turkey. It is generating a wave of

persecution against media, civil society, and academia that comes on top of the already widespread crackdown I described in 2014.

When protests were wracking Turkey in 2013 and we were watching police pour clouds of tear gas down Istanbul's streets, when the government was passing new laws restricting freedom of expression and assembly, or blocking Twitter and Facebook, one of the few bright spots we could all turn to was, "At least the peace process is still alive." Now that has been lost, too.

Why Did the Turkey-PKK Conflict Restart?

I think it is important to focus on the events that preceded the decision to return to conflict and to understand why and how the conflict re-started. In summary, the return to conflict is in significant part the result of the war in Syria being left to fester, which has both emboldened radical parts of the Kurdish movement in Turkey by showing that violence can achieve autonomy as it has for the Kurds in northern Syria, and has strengthened the arguments of traditional nationalist positions in Turkey that have always opposed pan-Kurdish sentiment through violence. Turkish members of the Islamic State who have traveled frequently to Syria have entered the fray, trying to widen this cleavage in Turkish society.

The PKK and the government had been in an official cease-fire since March 2013. During this time, the government conducted negotiations with the imprisoned head of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, allowing representatives of the Kurdish movement to visit him in prison in order to ensure any decisions would be seen as legitimate within the PKK. On February 28, 2015, the government and representatives of the Kurdish movement made a joint announcement in Istanbul of a roadmap for peace – what is widely known as "Dolmabahçe," because of where it was announced in Istanbul. The ten points of the announcement were vague, and their implementation unclear, but it was extremely significant, because for the first time government and Kurdish movement representatives shared a stage announcing together a joint plan for how to reach peace. On March 21, PKK

leader Öcalan's annual letter read at the annual Nevruz festival in Diyarbakir called for a disarmament congress.

Then something extremely surprising happened. Three weeks after Dolmabahçe, on March 22, President Erdoğan denounced the agreement. He claimed he had been excluded from the negotiations and was not informed of their content. This was in no way plausible, since he had been the head of government only six months before, had essentially appointed Prime Minister Davutoğlu, and Erdoğan's close advisor Yalçın Akdoğan had been leading the government's negotiating team. Erdoğan said that he did not approve of the government and the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP – a Kurdish party close to the PKK – making an announcement side by side. Dolmabahçe was dead.

I want to stress how surprising this was. Everyone knew relations between the PKK and the government were fragile. The success of the Kurdish Self-Protection Forces or YPG in northern Syria had increased the strength of hardline factions in the Kurdish movement in Turkey, and made it harder for Kurdish moderates to argue that the best way to achieve representation in Turkey was negotiations, especially as the Turkish government was very reluctant in cracking down on jihadists using Turkey as a transit zone to reach Syria, and opposed to supporting Kurds who fought those jihadists in Syria. In late 2014, the Islamic State's attack on the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani, and the Turkish government's decision to refrain from supporting the Kurds in that battle, had increased tensions to the point where protests called for by the Kurdish movement inside Turkey resulted in 43 deaths.

But the Dolmabahçe announcement – and the fact that Erdoğan's advisor Yalçın Akdoğan was the one responsible for negotiating it – seemed to indicate that there was still a chance to save the peace negotiations.

So why did Erdoğan come out against the agreement? For the last several years, Erdoğan has argued that Turkey needs a constitutional reform to create a presidential system, one where he would be the president with expanded powers. Because the other two opposition parties in Turkey are completely opposed to this plan, the clearest path for Erdoğan to

achieve presidentialism was to strike a “grand bargain” with the Kurds – they get greater autonomy for regional governments and protections for minority rights, and Erdoğan gets a presidential system. What led to Erdoğan’s decision to reject Dolmabahçe is that there was no longer any hope of a grand bargain.

In January, before Dolmabahçe, the HDP had decided to run as a party in the June 7 parliamentary elections. If it cleared Turkey’s 10 percent threshold for joining parliament, the AKP would have a harder time winning the seats it needed in parliament to call a constitutional referendum. Then on March 17, the co-leader of the HDP Selahattin Demirtaş said that there would be no grand bargain, announcing the de facto slogan for the HDP’s parliamentary campaign: “We will not make you president.” It was five days after that when Erdoğan announced his opposition to Dolmabahçe. Over the next four months, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) campaigned hard against the HDP and urged voters to give it the super-majority it needed for a presidential system.

From June 7 to November 1

The June 7 parliamentary elections were a disaster for the AKP. It lost its parliamentary majority, winning only 41 percent of the vote. Just as important was how it lost it – not only did the HDP easily clear the 10 percent threshold, but the hardline Nationalist Action Party (MHP) also increased its vote share, showing that the AKP’s years of negotiations with the PKK had cost it votes on the nationalist right. The war in Syria had strengthened the political position of the Kurdish party, but it had also strengthened traditional Turkish nationalist fears of Kurdish mobilization.

The AKP responded first by stalling in coalition negotiations to form a government, and then by restarting the war with the PKK. On July 20, an Islamic State (IS) suicide bomber attacked a group of young leftists and Kurds gathered to support the people of Kobani in Suruç in southeastern Turkey. The bombing killed 33 and injured 104. A hardline PKK faction retaliated by murdering two Turkish police officers whom it blamed for collaboration with IS. The government then used that killing as the justification to end the

cease-fire once and for all, launching extensive bombing raids against PKK camps in northern Iraq and detaining thousands of people, the most extensive arrests of Kurdish and leftist activists in Turkey since 2011. The military and police also launched extensive operations inside Turkish cities in the southeast, laying weeks-long curfews on entire districts and sending in tanks and heavy weapons to uproot the PKK's urban youth wing, the YDG-H.

Why did the PKK decide to return to the fight? Because it has felt threatened by the success of the political party the HDP, and especially its co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, which have been gaining ground with a strategy of non-violent political legitimization for the Kurds *within Turkey*. The HDP's success in the March 2014 local elections, and then in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, are threatening to hardline parts of the movement that follow the revolutionary ideology of the PKK. By going back to fighting the Turkish state, hardline elements are weakening the HDP as a political actor and strengthening the hand of militant factions within the Kurdish movement.

For the AKP's part, its political argument was that the June 7 elections results were leading to chaos, and it used the return to conflict as proof. With no coalition government able to form, new elections were held on November 1. The AKP's strategy worked up to a point – it won 49 percent of the vote this time. But the HDP still cleared the 10 percent threshold, meaning that the AKP still did not have the 330 seats it needed for a constitutional referendum.

This long story is important to explain why Turkey is back at war with the PKK inside Turkey. This was a *choice* made by President Erdoğan and the AKP in order to improve his chance at a presidential system, and a *choice* made by the PKK to undermine the success of the HDP as a political party – both of them reacting to changing circumstances inside Turkey due to the war in Syria.

The AKP has regained its parliamentary majority, but it does not have enough votes to bring a constitutional referendum for a presidential system. All of the opposition parties

are completely opposed to the presidential system. But if the AKP can get 13 members of parliament to defect from other parties, it can gain the super-majority needed for a referendum. The most likely place it will get those votes from is the hardline nationalist MHP, so a hardline nationalist policy must continue.

The PKK meanwhile is showing a new generation of young Kurds in the southeast that they should never trust the Turkish state or believe in the promise of politics, and that violent revolution is the answer. This narrative is supported by the success of the YPG across the border in Syria.

The Conflict and the Crackdown on Media and Civil Society

The conflict is having terrible consequences for Turkish society. I have already mentioned the horrific civilian death toll – since July, 230 civilians have been killed in the conflict, and another 135 killed by the Islamic State. There have been at least 62 day-and-night curfews for military operations placed on Turkish cities since July, including some that lasted two weeks. During these times residents cannot reach health care or access water in many cases; children cannot attend school. Tens of thousands of people have been forced from their homes, and the military is using tanks and heavy weaponry inside Turkish cities, leaving widespread destruction. Parts of Turkey's southeast now look like the war zones in Syria.

At least 22 HDP members of parliament are under criminal investigation, as is the HDP mayor of the southeast's largest city, Diyarbakir. Dozens of local officials from the HDP and other Kurdish parties have been arrested, including 18 co-mayors. Last week prosecutors requested at least 7 years' imprisonment for the mayor of Mardin Ahmet Türk, one of the elder statesmen of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. Kurdish human rights defender Tahir Elçi was killed in Diyarbakir in November. These are the kind of people on whom the peace process relied; without them it will be impossible to end the cycle of conflict.

The crackdown has extended to media and civil society, and is combining with the attack on the Gülen movement, which the government has labeled a terrorist organization and is persecuting relentlessly after the movement helped launch the December 2013 corruption investigations. The newspaper Bugün and the TV stations Bugün and Kanaltürk have been seized by the government. There are over 108,000 websites blocked in Turkey; since July an increasing number of these are Kurdish websites and critical sites the government considers linked to Gülen like the magazine Nokta. Turkey is by far the most aggressive country in the world in seeking to remove content from Twitter through court orders, accounting for 408 out of 442 global requests in the first half of 2015. Turkey is second only to India in content removal requests on Facebook.

In the last quarter of 2015 alone, there were 93 cases for insult and violation of personal rights of President Erdoğan, including against 42 journalists. In 2015, 19 journalists and 2 cartoonists received prison sentences for insulting President Erdoğan or other high officials. The local monitoring organization Bianet counts at least 30 journalists currently in jail, including the editor-in-chief and the Ankara bureau chief of the country's oldest newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*. Prosecutors are seeking aggravated life sentences for these two journalists for reporting on the National Intelligence Agency's use of humanitarian aid vans to smuggle weapons to militant groups in Syria.

Recommendations

- The Turkish government's attempt to destroy the Kurdish movement within Turkey is counter-productive not only to peace in Turkey, but to the efforts of the United States to bring an end to the crises in Syria and Iraq, especially as the United States is working closely with the Kurdish PYD in northern Syria to fight the Islamic State. The conflict in Turkey is contributing to the deepening radicalization of Kurds in Turkey and in Syria, and foreclosing any possibility that Turkey will be able to coexist with a stronger Kurdish presence in northern Syria, which is going to be a part of any conceivable end to the war there. The United States cannot turn a blind

eye to what is happening inside Turkey in exchange for Turkey's help in Syria. **The United States should call on its political capital both with the government of Turkey and with the Kurdish movement in Syria – which is closely connected to the one in Turkey – to bring about a cease-fire and urge a return to the peace process.**

- When I testified here in 2014, I advocated a strong United States emphasis on EU membership for Turkey in order to encourage progress on human rights. I must admit that such a policy now seems untenable. Despite a superficial commitment to EU accession, the current government has repeatedly and directly rejected the requirements of EU membership in the areas of human rights and rule of law, and instead the EU is cravenly making concessions to the government's authoritarianism. **The EU's decision this fall to trade Turkish cooperation in stopping refugee flows in exchange for a supposedly "reinvigorated" accession process for Turkey has made membership a matter of quid pro quo instead of political and economic convergence. Advancing Turkish accession to the EU at the expense of the EU's human rights principles is exposing the EU as cynical and shortsighted, destroying its greatest strength as a rules-based, values-driven institution.**

Conclusion

The return to war in Turkey is another way in which the decision to allow the conflict in Syria to fester has created a widening spiral of violence and destruction across the region and beyond. The United States' limited goal of destroying the Islamic State will not end the war in Syria, nor will it end the many new conflicts the war has spawned and old ones it has re-ignited. The United States needs to cease compartmentalizing its approach to the Middle East, including to Turkey, and avoid focusing on short-term objectives at the expense of long-term goals. The meeting of President Biden with critical journalists in Turkey during his trip in January was a positive action, but ultimately it is only symbolic without a

concerted effort to bring the Turkish government and the PKK back to the table. Without negotiations, I am afraid that Turkey is doomed to go further and further into the region's cycle of violence.