

Who Started the War Between the Turkish State and the PKK - Erdogan or the PKK?

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News

Following the suicide bomb generally attributed to an IS militant in the Turkish town Suruc on the Turkish-Syrian border on July the 20th, which killed 32 people, the armed clashes between the Turkish security forces and the PKK resumed after almost 3 years of truce. The clashes have cost hundreds of lives until now, and at this moment another truce does not seem to be within reach.

Summary

The article analyses two fundamental narratives about who broke the truce since 2012 between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan's Workers' Party). The first one explains the resumption of armed clashes with reference to the President Erdogan's unfulfilled ambition of being a president with extraordinary powers. The other framework stresses the PKK's ambitions of establishing a "Western Kurdistan" ("Rojava") in Northern Syria by maintaining and fortifying its privileged position as the Western world's most trusted ally in the fight against IS (Islamic State).

Key Words

Turkey, Erdogan, PKK, Rojava, Cemil Bayik, truce, armed struggle

About the Author

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Analysis:

There are basically two narratives about who started the war and why. The first puts the blame on President Erdogan and the other one, not surprisingly, on the PKK. The first explanation goes like this: Erdogan wanted to get sufficient votes to get 400 seats for the AKP at the June elections so that he would become the powerful president with wide executive powers. However, not only did the AKP fail to win 400 seats, it even lost its parliamentary majority, winning only 258 seats with 40.9 percent of the vote and thus lost its power to form a government alone. This result was primarily due to the electoral success of the pro-Kurdish HDP, which got 13.1 percent of the votes, much more than the threshold of 10 percent. Many analysts stressed that the HDP's new votes came from the pious Kurds, who until the elections on June 7 voted for the AKP, but since they became dissatisfied with AKP's policies towards the Kurdish question, their votes shifted in favour of HDP. Therefore, continues the explanation in question, Erdogan out of the blue ordered the military and the police forces to resume the clashes both to punish the Kurds because of their "treason" and to win back the nationalist-minded Turkish voters, who were unhappy with his peace process with the Kurds, and who therefore migrated to the ultranationalist MHP, which has been a fierce opponent of peace with the PKK. Another factor put forward by this narrative is that Erdogan and the AKP are fixated on decimating HDP's 6 million votes either by showing that it is not really interested in continuing the peace process or by criminalizing it claiming that it takes orders from the PKK leaders based in Northern Iraq (Berkan 2015a,b).

Different versions of this narrative are championed by a heterogeneous spectrum of people which span from the PKK and the HDP and large parts of the Turkish left (Candar 2015a,b; Cemal 2015) to the main opposition party CHP. Thus, there is another version of this narrative, and it comes from the ultranationalist circles such as the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) and the right-wing Kemalists represented by the newspaper *Sözcü* (The Spokesman). The ultranationalists agree with the main anti-Erdogan narrative that it was he who started the war on July 24th to create a nationalist atmosphere to be able to appear as the saviour of the nation in trouble and thus guarantee success in the early election on November 1st. However, they also stress that the peace process with the PKK was a big mistake from the start. In their own words it was actually "not a process of solution of the Kurdish question, but of the process of the dissolution of the fatherland", and thus "treachery against the nation" (Radikal 2015). Recently, MHP went a step further and lodged a second official complaint against Erdogan and "all those responsible for starting and carrying out the so-called peace process with the PKK" at the Public Prosecutor's Office of Ankara "for attempting to destroy our national unity" (*Milliyet* 2015).

According to the nationalist opponents of the peace process, the government overlooked during the peace process PKK's stocking of arms and explosives in the cities and in the mountainous areas within Turkey's borders, because AKP got half of the Kurdish votes and it therefore did not want to put at risk its good relations with the Kurds. However, when pre-election polls suggested that Kurds were going to abandon AKP in favour of HDP, Erdogan allegedly panicked and finished off the process. Therefore, Erdogan is seen as the sole person responsible for the deaths of the soldiers and police officers (Berkan 2015).

The Second Narrative: The PKK Bears the Prime Responsibility

The second narrative blames primarily the PKK for the resumption of the armed clashes. There are also apparently different versions of this narrative, as in almost every debate, differing basically on the issue of the government's, and especially Erdogan's, possible mistakes during the peace process. Defenders of the more nuanced versions of this narrative put forward three types of arguments: Chronological, geostrategic and political. First of all, they point to what they consider as the right chronology of events up to the resumption of the air strikes on July 24 on the PKK bases in Northern Iraq after 3 years of respite (Ogur 2015). In the same breath, Turkish air forces also attacked Islamic State targets in Northern Syria as retaliation for the killing of a Turkish border guard the day before by IS militants on the Turkish-Syrian border.

A suicide bomber reportedly with links to Islamic State (IS) blew himself up killing thirty-two young socialist activists on July 20th (*BBC World* 2015a; *Aljazeera* 2015). Jiyar Gol, BBC regional expert, wrote the same day that "Local Kurdish politicians in Suruc blame the Islamic State (IS) group for the attack" (*BBC World* 2015b). However, shortly afterwards national Kurdish politicians and the PKK leaders based in Qandil Mountains in Northern Iraq had another story to tell.

The day before the suicide bomb a prominent PKK leader, Cemil Bayik, called on the Kurdish people to arm itself and to dig tunnels and barricades in towns and cities (*T24* 2015a). This was merely one of the many declarations of "people's war" and threats to start armed struggle, which the PKK leaders have issued in the months up to the resumption of the armed clashes. The threats to resume armed struggle were so frequent that some days before Bayik's dramatic declaration, the Kurdish academician and analyst Vahap Coskun had commented as such: "The PKK's threats are getting boring" (Coskun 2015a).

Two days after the suicide bomb, PKK militants killed two police officers in Ceylanpinar breaking in late at night and using silencers to shoot the two sleeping policemen in

the backs of their heads. In a declaration reported in the PKK-related Firat News Agency, People's Defence Forces (HPG), PKK's armed wing, stated: "A team of Abdullah Öcalan's Fedayeen in retaliation for the massacre in Suruc, has carried out a punishment action against two police officers who were in cooperation with the Islamic State bandits at 6.00 o'clock AM on July the 22nd" (Rudaw 2015, T24 2015b, Berktaç 2015; Coskun 2015b; Oğur 2015)

One can say that the PKK by killing these two officers and proudly taking the responsibility on HPG's home page definitely broke the truce. The general public opinion in Turkey and abroad apparently saw it that way also, and the PKK recognized gradually that its prestige as freedom fighters against Turkish oppression and valiant fighters against the IS has been tarnished. To blur the PKK's responsibility for the police murders, two explanations were put forward (Coskun 2015b).

The co-chairman of HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, came up with a conspiratorial theory, which in fact is a slightly maverick extension of the Erdogan-did-it narrative. He claimed that Erdogan has established his own clandestine army, which allegedly is responsible both for the suicide bomb in Suruc and the following provocative attacks on security forces attributed to the PKK and used by Erdogan as a pretext to start the war (T24 2015c).

The day after Demirtaş's statement, Demhat Agit, the PKK's foreign affairs spokesman, contradicted him by saying "local forces . . . not affiliated with us" and "units independent from the PKK" did the execution-like killings (Hamsici 2015). Some analysts found this explanation rather unconvincing (e.g., Coskun 2015b).

These are shortly the arguments related to the chronology of events, presented by the champions of the narrative blaming primarily the PKK for the resumption of clashes. The defenders of this narrative also point to the larger geopolitical background for the PKK's (in their eyes) planned and cold-headed decision to break the truce and start an almost all-out war.

After the IS began to direct its attacks on the Kurdish areas in Northern Syria - the so-called cantons under the control of the Syrian wing of the PKK, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) - and especially following PKK's and PYD's defence against IS's fierce attack on Kobane in September 2014, the PKK began to appear as USA's only organized, trained and willing local ally in the fight against IS. By allying itself with the PKK-related Syrian Kurds, the US could avoid getting embroiled in the Syrian civil war by sending land troops. The American plan was apparently bombing the IS from the air and let the Syrian Kurds do the rest. This was a very favourable position for the PKK, and it wanted to capitalize on it by establishing a Kurdish corridor between the areas near the Iraqi border and Turkey's Hatay province in the West. The Iraqi Kurds had

established a de facto Kurdistan in Northern Iraq with American support. Why could the PKK and the PYD not do the same in Northern Syria? The peace process with Ankara was not so important anymore, and it could be postponed indefinitely. Negotiations with Turkey could start with the PKK having a Syrian Kurdistan card to play. So “Rojava” (“Western Kurdistan”) became more important than peace with Turkey and an autonomous Kurdish area within Turkey gained by peaceful means.

However, after the PKK captured the Syrian town of Telabiyad on June 16, 2015 with the help of heavy American air bombardments (Salih 2015), Turkey began to participate actively in the anti-IS coalition. Negotiations between the US and Turkey resulted in Turkey allowing American war planes and drones to use a number of Turkish air bases for raids against IS in Syria. Thus, PKK lost its privileged position in the eyes of the US and other NATO countries. This became a big problem for the PKK, and this is the reason, claims the second narrative, why the PKK began to threaten Turkey frequently with resuming the armed struggle and did in fact start it by killing the two police officers. PKK could not have failed to guess that the government, already under great pressure from the anti-peace process nationalists, would retaliate fiercely or would feel compelled to do so, say the defenders of this narrative (see for example Coskun 2015, Berktaş 2015).

Finally, the defenders of this PKK-critical narrative question whether PKK’s armed struggle against the Turkish state has any legitimacy at all. Whenever asked why it resorts to violence, the standard answer from the PKK has been that it does not have any other choice. However, the PKK-critics point to the fact that the HDP has 80 seats in the parliament, runs 103 local councils, controls large NGOs and enjoys unprecedented good-will in the mainstream media both in Turkey and abroad. What legitimate reasons can there be for a movement, which is well-represented in the country’s main democratic institutions, to resort to armed struggle, they ask (Özaltınli 2015, Berktaş 2015).

How to Stop the Violence?

Very few, especially left-wing, defenders of the narrative blaming Erdogan for the recent explosion of violence put a question mark beside PKK’s claims of the legitimacy of its armed struggle (for an exception see for example Dagistanli 2015, 2011). Many seem to be confusing the historical victim position of the Kurds, persistently reminding their audience on the one hand of the massacres committed by the Turkish state against them, especially in 1925 and 1938, and the correctness and the ethics of concrete policies of some Kurdish politicians in specific contexts on the other. The title of a Danish documentary on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict released in 1976 bore the title “An oppressed people is always right” (*Et undertrykt folk har altid ret*) (Vest 1976), which

captures the tendency among large sections of the global left in the 1960s and the 1970s. This approach seems still to be influential in large sections of the Turkish Left.

Another question supporters of the Erdogan-critical narrative fail to ask themselves is: If the resumption of the war is the result of Erdogan's secret and heinous plans, why did the PKK fall into his trap? PKK leaders incessantly point to what Erdogan said about the peace process in the last half year. Let's for once suppose that Erdogan spoiled the peace process by attacking it verbally. Should the reaction to verbal attacks be armed attacks? What about countering them with peaceful democratic means?

There is a lot that suggests that the AKP and the Turkish army are ready to strain every nerve "to crush the PKK" and that the PKK, with its similar psychological make-up, wishes to show that it is still going strong and is capable of doing great harm to Turkish armed forces. Enough blood has been shed and at the moment the most important thing is to convince the warring parties to stop this senseless violence and to sit down at the negotiating table as soon as possible.

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