

Turkey: "War against terrorism" emboldens fascists and the military

Justus Leicht
29 September 2001

While most of the Turkish population has reacted to the terror attacks in New York and Washington with sincere sympathy for the victims, the Turkish establishment has barely tried to conceal its pleasure and cynical calculation. From the broadly acclaimed "democratic reformer", Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, to his social democratic prime minister, Bulent Ecevit, to the bulk of the Turkish mass media, the message reads: the attack and the "war against terrorism" confirm the correctness of the state terror carried out by Ankara against Kurdish separatism. In the future, they hope, the Turkish state will no longer be beleaguered with demands for greater democracy and respect for human rights.

Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz of the conservative ANAP (Motherland Party), who has assumed the pose in recent months of the political "liberal" in the government, and even squabbled with the powerful officers corps, stated: "The world will understand the determined and rightful struggle of Turkey against terrorism.... The terrorist attacks in the United States will be an important opportunity for the world to realise the facts."

To recall: in the course of the 15-year war conducted by the Turkish state in the southeast of the country against the Kurdish nationalist PKK (Workers Party of Kurdistan) over 30,000 guerrillas and soldiers were killed. In addition, several thousand Kurdish civilians—including women, children and old men—were killed, mainly by state security forces and death squads. Countless people were abducted to state torture chambers. Hundreds suffered an agonising death in such places. Thousands, many of whom had never participated in armed struggle, were imprisoned for years, or even decades, in inhuman conditions. More than 3,000 villages were burned down by the military.

For two decades a state of war prevailed in a fifth of the country, with the suppression of all rights to free speech, press freedom and public assembly, enforced by daily arrests and house searches carried out by security forces.

Now Ankara is demanding that European countries hand over the leading cadre of the PKK, the Maoist DHKP-C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Party and Front) and Islamic groups. In addition, Turkey is seeking earlier admission into the European Union, prior to undertaking any improvements on human rights and the protection of ethnic minorities. In its edition of September 17, the English-language *Turkish Daily News* detected support for the Turkish demands from unidentified "high-ranking EU [European Union] diplomats in Ankara".

In an interview with the Reuters news agency, the chairman of the Turkish Human Rights Organisation, Yavuz Önen, warned: "Fighting terrorism has come onto the world agenda, and the military will use the following argument: 'Didn't we say [the danger of] terrorism takes precedence over everything else? If you expand freedoms, you will face a risky environment.'"

Up to now the Turkish military has refrained from public comment. Their standpoint is represented by the fascists of the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party, or "Grey Wolves"), who occupy, amongst others, the

post of defence minister in the current government. They are blocking a number of changes to the constitution that are aimed at easing Turkey's entry into the EU. Such changes include the abolition of the death penalty, recognition of the Kurdish language in education and the media, and greater freedom of thought.

In response to pressure from the MHP, the death penalty is to be imposed for vaguely defined "terrorist activities" (i.e., not only terrorist acts). This means that the death sentence decreed for PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan remains in force.

The restrictions on the Kurdish language have been only minimally changed. The right to a free press and dissenting opinion is likewise to remain drastically curtailed. According to changes agreed to by the responsible committee, radio and television programmes directed against the "foundations of the state, public order, territorial and national integrity, and national security" are to remain banned.

The Turkish government has lined up completely behind the war preparations of the United States, promoting Turkey as Washington's indispensable partner. Ankara even boasts that Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which was invoked as a demonstration of solidarity with the US, was introduced in 1998 largely as a result of Turkish pressure.

Turkey's special forces, feared and hated by the people of southeast Turkey, are now to use their experience in guerrilla warfare for the training of Afghan opposition groups in the Northern Alliance. Turkey has given the US flying rights over its territory, and the air base at Incirlik, which has been the staging ground for American and British bombing sorties against Iraq, has been fortified with new armaments. Despite repeated denials by the Turkish government, rumours continue to circulate that the US plans to make use of the military bases of Malatya and Diyarbakir in the Kurdish region of the country.

In the Turkish *Daily News* of September 22, the well-known journalist Mehmet Ali Birand wrote: "When you mention Iraq, Turkey is the first country that comes to mind. In every operation against Iraq they need Turkey's active support, or at least verbal backing."

"There is also some attention given to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, which is controlled by Syria. There are still militant groups being trained in the Bekaa Valley. These groups are reportedly sheltered by Syria and the US wants to clear them out."

"A Bush administration official says Turkey would know the Bekaa better than anyone else. 'The PKK trained in the Bekaa for years; they flourished there. It is important to wipe out the terrorists in the Bekaa.'"

In fact, the main target of state repression is neither the usual scapegoats, nor the threat of Islamic terror groups, but rather the Turkish working class.

Some terrorist activities have been carried out by Islamic fundamentalists in Turkey in the past. In particular, between 1991 and 1995 the Hisbollah organisation exercised a reign of terror in some Kurdish regions and undertook a campaign of murder—especially of those in the civilian, legal and semi-legal circles of the PKK. A number of

reports, not only from left-wing or Kurdish journalists, but also from investigatory committees of the Turkish parliament, have produced evidence that the Hisbollah had been built up, supported and sponsored by a section of the Turkish military. Now, following the capitulation of the PKK, the Hisbollah is due to be crushed.

The nationalist Turkish press has been outdoing itself in its efforts to find similarities between Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Öcalan. It is evident, however, that the Turkish state has nothing to fear from the PKK and Kurdish nationalism. The PKK vigorously condemned the terror attacks on New York and Washington and repeatedly begged the US and Turkey to collaborate with them, rather than step up repression and provoke a new rebellion by the Kurds.

The Maoist DHKC also represents no real threat to the Turkish establishment. The organisation enjoys a certain amount of sympathy in the slums of the big cities and in the universities. It combines a form of Turkish nationalism, couched in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist phrases, with a cult of leadership in the most odious Stalinist fashion. The organisation drew attention to itself with two suicide attacks on police stations this year, first in the spring and then in September, the most recent occurring just before the attacks carried out in the US.

The suicide bombers sought revenge for the death of their comrades in prison, who perished following a hunger strike against inhuman conditions and the introduction of isolation cells. Twenty prisoners were killed when security forces stormed the prisons last December, and 35 subsequently starved themselves to death.

In the eyes of the state, a more serious challenge is so-called “political Islam”. Although all of Turkey’s right-wing and conservative parties repeatedly evoke religious prejudices and sentiments, the designation refers to the two organisations that emerged from the banned Islamic Virtue Party (FP), i.e., the AKP (Party of Justice and Development), led by the former lord mayor of Istanbul, Tayip Erdogan, and the SP (Contentment Party) of the former FP leader Recai Kutan.

Erdogan, in particular, has become a favourite of the media in recent months. His party is by far the strongest, according to opinion polls, and is currently the only Islamic-based organisation deemed capable of achieving the 10 percent threshold required for participation in the Turkish parliament. He represents the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie” (also called Islamic capital), and attempts to combine free-market liberalism with social demagoguery and nationalism, emphasising his loyalty to the state while criticising state repression, and acknowledging laicism while appealing to religious layers. It will likely prove somewhat difficult to accuse a party of links to terrorism when its leader declares his role models to be the ANAP of the deceased Turkish head of state Turgut Özal as well as the conservative German Christian Democratic Union of Helmut Kohl.

The real threat to the ruling class in Turkey and its Western backers lies elsewhere, a point made by the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (September 17): “More widespread than militant Islam are anti-American sentiments. The strict requirements laid down for the crisis-ridden country by the International Monetary Fund have served to strengthen such moods.”

Of the 15 reform measures that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has linked to the implementation of an aid package amounting to \$15.7 billion, seven have already come into effect and six more have been approved either by the Council of Ministers or parliament.

Since February, investment banks have been taken over by the Central Bank executive council and made available for privatisation, supplementary budget funds have been eliminated, and subsidies for sugar and tobacco have been axed. State tenders are to be made more dependent on cost factors and less on personal connections.

Since then real wages have fallen by more than 50 percent, with millions of workers forced to survive on the minimum wage of around \$90. A speaker for a Turkish umbrella organisation of trade unions, Türk Is,

commented: “Nobody can live on such an income for any length of time under normal conditions.”

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented on July 13: “Not only millions of minimum wage earners, but also many small businessmen are in dire straits because of price rises. A teacher earns about 250 million lira, around 424 German marks. With that, it is possible for a single person to live if he cuts corners and does not have to pay rent. But one cannot feed a family on such money. Many Turks try, therefore, to survive with two or three jobs. But such jobs are also difficult to find since the crisis forced thousands of firms into bankruptcy, with the loss of at least 500,000 jobs.”

The newspaper continued: “Worries that the pain limit could be reached are apparently a source of concern for the Turkish military. The National Security Council, which is dominated by leading generals, recently presented a secret report at a meeting, according to Istanbul newspapers. The paper warned that the growing impoverishment of broad layers of the population would lead to a ‘social explosion’. The Istanbul police reported that incidents of street robbery have increased tenfold over the past three months. On the other hand, the crisis appears to be leaving no traces among upper-class layers.”

Since then, the crisis has deepened. According to the state Institute of Statistics, gross national product shrank by 11.8 percent in the second quarter of this year—nearly twice the figure predicted for this year by Turkey’s economic minister, Kemal Dervis.

There are no prospects for improvement—quite the opposite. The uncertainty over the consequences for the Turkish economy of American retaliatory actions led to a more than 10 percent drop in the National Index of the Istanbul stock market on the single day of September 17, with the Turkish currency falling to its lowest point against the dollar this year. Although the current war preparations are expected to negatively influence the pillars of Dervis’s stability programme, tourism and exports, Dervis is determined to stick to his “reform programme”.

It is now half a year since the programme devised by Dervis, and imposed on Turkey by the IMF and World Bank in collaboration with Turkish President Sezer and the military, was praised by the media in Turkey and abroad as a miracle cure against corruption and nepotism within the state apparatus. From the right-wing Turkish daily *Hürriyet* to the PKK, from the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to the traditionally liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* in Germany, Dervis was celebrated as the great “renewer”, who would lead Turkey to the status of a modern democracy.

Now the real content of the “reform programme” is becoming clear: the collapse of entire branches of the economy and indescribable mass poverty. The only answer given by official politics is: more of the same! In reality, the main function of the so-called “struggle against terrorism” consists of the struggle to liberate the banks and business concerns from any democratic restrictions in their campaign against the working class.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact