

Turkish government escalates war against Kurdish PKK

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The interim Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, led by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, has put much of southeastern Turkey under de facto martial law, and is escalating its military operations against the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria in the name of combatting “terrorism.” It is whipping up a climate of fear and intimidation that threatens to spiral out of control.

Turkey’s security forces have launched a large-scale attack on Kurdish targets in the wake of Monday’s bomb attack that killed 12 police officers in eastern Turkey, near the border with Azerbaijan, which the government has blamed on the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The operation included sending ground forces into Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish militants, the first time for two years.

This follows an attack on Sunday that killed 16 Turkish soldiers in the southeast that in turn led to a massive air operation that killed around 40 PKK militants.

Prime Minister Davutoglu told reporters that Turkey would not be deflected from its “war on terror,” saying, “Those mountains will be cleared of these terrorists. Whatever it takes, they will be cleared.” President Erdogan also promised a “decisive” response.

Turkish security forces have now been engaged in military operations against the PKK and the Kurds on a daily basis for nearly two months.

The renewed civil war follows the government’s termination of the much-stalled “peace process” after the PKK called off its armed struggle and indicated its willingness to come to the negotiating table in March 2013. The move had signalled the end of the 30-year-long civil war that claimed the lives of 40,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands villagers.

Last month, the Turkish army established more than

100 so-called “Special Security Zones” in the Kurdish provinces in a move tantamount to declaring martial law. After a call by the PKK, 12 Kurdish cities, including the provincial capital Sirnak with 60,000 inhabitants, declared their “self-government,” and that the AKP government was “illegitimate.”

The numerous checkpoints erected to stop and search vehicles, and mass detentions, have angered local people. Anti-government demonstrations have been met with violence by the security forces, with the PKK’s youth wing, the Patriotic Revolutionist Youth Movement, involved in clashes with police. Activists reported a number of deaths and local media reported a communications blackout. The governor of Diyarbakir province announced curfews in Silvan and Lice.

The PKK’s military wing, based in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq, warned that it would send in guerrilla fighters from the People’s Defence Forces (HPG) to protect Kurdish youth activists against state violence by the Turkish authorities.

Turkish fighter jets have bombed the positions of the PKK in Iraq and the Syrian Kurdish forces of the Democratic Unity Party and its militia, the Popular Protection Units (PYD/YPG). The PYD/YPG have set up an autonomous region in Syria, across the border from Turkey, to which Ankara is vehemently opposed, fearing it will lead to a similar secession by Turkey’s Kurds.

Last week, the Turkish parliament voted to extend for another year the government’s mandate to send forces to combat Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) and Kurdish militants in neighbouring Syria and Iraq that was due to expire on 2 October. The mandate also allows foreign forces to transit Turkish territory in operations against ISIS and permits US air forces to use Turkey’s Incirlik air base to carry out air strikes in

Syria that began 12 August following months of negotiations.

While Ankara has joined the US-led war, ostensibly against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, its involvement in the campaign against ISIS, whom it has long sponsored, has been far outweighed by its air and ground campaign against the PKK and their allies in Syria and Iraq.

Between 24 July and 28 August, it launched 13 waves of airstrikes against the PKK, hitting more than 400 targets, compared to just one strike against ISIS, hitting three targets. On 29 and 30 August, Turkey finally joined the coalition forces, striking at 13 ISIS positions.

The mandate was approved by the ruling AKP and the main opposition Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Movement Party, but opposed by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Despite this, the HDP, which won 13 percent of the vote in the election last June, thereby depriving the AKP of the chance to amend the constitution in favour of an executive presidency, is the only opposition party to have joined Davutoglu's interim "election cabinet."

At the same time, Ankara is clamping down on the press and all dissent at home. Last week, the Turkish authorities arrested and detained two British journalists and their Iraqi interpreter working for the US-based media outlet Vice News on trumped up charges of "engaging in terror activity." The reporters had been travelling in southeastern Turkey. While the British journalists have been released, their translator remains in jail on spurious charges of aiding ISIS.

Turkish police also raided the offices of a media company, Koza Ipek, Turkish conglomerate and media group with close links to the US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, a former ally but now fierce critic of President Erdogan.

Erdogan has indicated that he may close down some media outlets on the grounds that they support terrorism in the run-up to the 1 November election. The first targets are likely to be those outlets owned by the Gulen movement, followed by Ipek and other outlets critical of the AKP government.

International media watchdogs have frequently criticised Turkey's attacks on press freedom with Freedom House's 2015 report referring to Turkey as a country where the press is "not free" and its performance worse than at any time in the past 10 years. It emphasised that many journalists were

targeted, threatened and arrested. Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkey 149th out of 180 countries in its latest press freedom index.

The pro-Kurdish HDP has also come in for attacks from the ruling AKP. In the run-up to the elections, there were more than 100 attacks on the party, all without any effective investigation. Two days before the election, a bomb at an HDP election rally in Diyarbakir killed four people and injured 200. It was detonated by an ISIS member who had been briefly detained and released by the police just two days earlier.

The Obama administration has given all the AKP's moves the nod as the necessary quid pro quo for Turkey joining the US-led war against ISIS and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which is part of Washington's attempts to control the resource-rich region.

This is despite the fact that the Kurdish Peshmerga, the militia belonging to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and the Syrian Kurdish forces PYD/YPG are by far the most effective forces fighting ISIS.

Since the election, the government has sought to blame the HDP for supporting terrorism, initiating criminal investigations against the party's two co-leaders, as a prelude to banning it or severely curtailing its activities.

In so doing, the AKP, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is seeking to create the conditions for it to restore its parliamentary majority in the forthcoming elections, scheduled for 1 November. The new elections follow the failure of the AKP, which won the largest number of votes but not an overall majority in last June's elections, to form a coalition government.

If as seems likely, his calculations misfire—polls indicate support for the AKP is falling while that of the HDP is possibly increasing—the escalating tensions and civil war against the PKK would provide a convenient pretext for abandoning the elections.



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