

Angry protests follow terror bombings in Turkey

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Thousands of people demonstrated in Ankara and other Turkish cities on Saturday and Sunday following twin bombings at an anti-government peace rally in Ankara earlier Saturday that killed 128 people and injured more than 200. Demonstrators denounced the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, blaming his anti-Kurdish campaign of bombings and repression for the explosions that turned a peaceful protest into a bloody nightmare.

Police attacked demonstrators in the nation's capital with tear gas on Sunday, preventing them from laying carnations at the site of Saturday's bombings.

Two massive bombs exploded Saturday morning near Ankara's central train station in the midst of the mass march called by the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), various left-wing groups and a number of trade unions to demand an end to the war between the Turkish government and the banned Kurdistan Worker's party (PKK).

The terrorist bombings took place under conditions of a deepening political crisis in Turkey over its highly unpopular role in the Syrian war, in which Ankara has sponsored Islamist fighters, including ISIS, in a bid to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and prevent the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish state in Syria adjacent to Turkey's own Kurdish population.

Within Turkey itself, the government recently resumed the civil war against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has cost the lives of at least 40,000 people since the war began in 1984, and faces increasing discontent in the face of a worsening economic crisis.

As yet, the precise cause of the explosions remains unclear and no group has claimed responsibility for the criminal act. However, regardless of who carried out the attack, President Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will try to turn it to their own advantage.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, head of an interim AKP government pending new elections on November 1, initially issued a ban on news coverage of the bombings, which, however, was widely ignored.

Davutoglu pointed the finger of blame at a number of possible culprits, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the PKK, and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party–Front (DHKP-C). “The attack in Ankara targets our unity, democracy, peace,” he declared, calling it “the most painful incident in the history of the Turkish republic.”

President Barack Obama telephoned Erdoğan amid mounting international concern over the political crisis in Turkey and “affirmed that the American people stand in solidarity with the people of Turkey in the fight against terrorism and shared security challenges in the region.”

However, Selahattin Demirtas, co-leader of the HDP, attacked the government, calling it a “mafia state” with a “state mentality that acts like a serial killer.” He was referring to the gangs mobilised by the AKP and ultra-nationalists that repeatedly attacked the HDP's offices and personnel during and since the campaign for last June's national elections, while the police stood back.

Demirtas continued, “We are faced with a murderous mob state. How is it possible that a state with such a strong intelligence network did not have prior information on the attack?” He added, “Gang leaders can hold safe rallies in this country, but those who want peace are murdered.”

Thousands of demonstrators in Ankara on Sunday, including witnesses, victims' families and opposition parties, held the government directly responsible for Saturday's tragedy for failing to provide any security ahead of the rally. Instead, police who appeared after the explosions fired teargas at victims' families who came to inquire about their loved ones.

There were chants of “murderer Erdoğan” and

“murderer police” in Sihhiye square as riot police equipped with water cannon blocked the main road leading to the parliament and government buildings. The crowd accused the government of deliberately whipping up a climate of fear and intimidation ahead of the November 1 elections in order either to delay the poll and thus retain power or increase its chance of winning a majority. But government officials have insisted that, despite security concerns, the elections will go ahead.

The elections follow the failure of the AKP to win an overall majority in June due to the rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP. The HDP secured 13 percent of the vote in the June election, thereby depriving the AKP of the chance to amend the constitution in favour of an executive presidency. The AKP refused to form a coalition government with any of the three opposition parties, gambling that it would be able to secure an overall majority in November. But it is far from clear that it will be successful.

The government relaunched the war against the PKK after two-and-a-half years of fruitless negotiations during which it failed to put forward any concrete proposals. Erdoğan put Kurdish towns under curfew and imposed de facto military rule. In one of the most notorious incidents, it imposed an eight-day curfew on Cizre, where army snipers shot people, including children, in the street, killing more than 20, and then fired on people going to help the victims.

Since the resumption of the civil war against the PKK shortly after the June election, 140 members of the security forces have been killed. The government says it has killed more than 1,700 militants.

In addition, the government has sought to criminalize or at least cripple the HDP by inciting physical attacks on its offices and legal attacks on its leaders and mayors under the guise of fighting “terrorism.” This is despite the fact that the HDP’s co-leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, has done everything possible to distinguish himself from the PKK, incurring the wrath of PKK leadership in Iraq, and even briefly entered the interim government in Ankara before pulling out.

Immediately after the Ankara bombings, the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire so as to avoid anything that could obstruct a “fair and just election” on November 1. Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan dismissed the ceasefire as a “tactic” ahead of the election, and a senior security official told Reuters, “The PKK ceasefire means nothing for us. Operations will continue without a break.”

On Saturday and Sunday, Turkish warplanes struck

PKK targets in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, killing 30 to 35 PKK militants in northern Iraq and 14 PKK militants in Diyarbakir province in Turkey.

In citing ISIS as the likely perpetrator of Saturday’s bombings in Ankara, the government said they were very similar to the July suicide bombing in Suruç near the Syrian border, for which ISIS later claimed responsibility.

That attack was used as the pretext for entering the US-led coalition ostensibly against ISIS and resuming the war against the PKK in northern Iraq and Turkey. Washington, in return for being allowed to use Turkey’s Incirlik base for air attacks on Iraq and Syria, turned a blind eye to Turkey’s raids, even though the Kurdish militia in Iraq and Syria were the most effective fighting forces against ISIS.

Russia’s direct military intervention into the Syrian civil war to bolster the Assad regime, in collaboration with Iran, Iraq and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, has further cut across Ankara’s interests. Moscow has attacked not just ISIS, but other Islamist forces, including Al Qaeda-linked groups backed by Ankara that are fighting Syrian Kurdish forces of the Democratic Unity Party and its militia, the Popular Protection Units (PYD/YPG).

Ankara has become increasingly bellicose, accusing Moscow of repeatedly violating its airspace in the last week. Speaking to reporters during a flight to Japan on October 7, Erdoğan said that he “cannot accept the current situation,” adding that “Russia’s explanations on the air space violations are not convincing.” He warned that Turkey, which gets 55 percent of its gas from Russia, would seek to import more of its gas from other suppliers.

Erdoğan further threatened that not only was he prepared to confront Russia, he was confident that he had the backing of both the United States and NATO if he decided to act against Russia’s intervention in Syria, increasing the risk of a much wider war involving the world’s two biggest nuclear powers.



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