

As fighting in Turkey mounts, Kurdish nationalists escalate independence drive

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As wars in Syria and Iraq are escalating, so is the Turkish ruling elite's longstanding fear for the country's territorial integrity. Ankara is stepping up both "anti-terror operations" against ethnic Kurdish areas of eastern Turkey and its attacks on democratic rights.

Since July, more than 300 civilians, including 61 children, have been killed and hundreds of people have been wounded in conflicts between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey. More than 200,000 people have fled their towns. Meanwhile, the Turkish government has intensified its pressure on its opponents, arresting dozens of people, including well-known journalists, business people, academics and even judges and prosecutors.

Despite growing military operations and police-state measures, however, Kurdish nationalists—whose struggle against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is backed by factions of the US and European imperialist bourgeoisie, as well as Russia—are not surrendering. They are responding to Ankara's war, both at home and abroad, in Iraq and Syria, with military escalation and an appeal to Russia and the imperialist powers for support against Ankara.

Over the weekend, the DTK (Democratic Society Congress) General Assembly held an extraordinary meeting in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey. The congress resolution, titled "Declaration of political resolution regarding self-rule," states: "The Kurdish people have started a process of struggle, based on their own strength, after the rejection of their demand for legal and political status."

The resolution outlines the Kurdish nationalists' demands in Turkey for the first time. It raises 14 demands, including "formation of autonomous regions to involve neighboring provinces

in consideration of cultural, economic and geographic affinities," and "ending of all tutelage by the centralized administration over democratic autonomous regions."

According to the resolution, these "autonomous regions" would have broad authority to arrange economic and social life: the "operation and supervision of land, water and energy sources, and production sharing," "education in the mother tongue," "collection of some taxes," "establishment of official local security units," etc. This would involve "the participation of town, neighborhood, village, youth's, women's and faith groups' assemblies," under a "new democratic constitution" of Turkey.

Opening the DTK congress, Selahattin Demirtas, the co-chairman of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), said: "This resistance will end with victory, and everyone will respect the people's will. Kurds will from now on be the political will in their own region. During these days when a historical breaking point is emerging, our people will decide whether dictatorship or freedom and whether to live under one man's tyranny or in autonomy... Perhaps, Kurds will have their own independent state, the federal state, and cantons and autonomous regions as well."

The extraordinary congress came days after Demirtas' visit to Moscow. On December 23, after a trip to Washington, Demirtas met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow, reportedly to discuss developments in Syria and the diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Russia. It appears that, in retaliation for the Turkish downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber over Syria last month, Moscow is moving to back Kurdish separatist sentiment in Turkey.

Speaking to journalists before meeting with Lavrov, Demirtas said that the downing of the Russian jet was

“not a right move,” and added that they “criticized the actions of the government when the Russian plane was shot down.”

Lavrov said Russia would “take into account” the HDP’s “assessments” of the situation in Syria, noting that Moscow was ready for an “active cooperation” with Kurds against ISIS.

The Turkish government reacted by angrily denouncing the HDP leader and accusing him of treason. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Demirtas' statements were “delusional” and added that they were a violation of the Turkish constitution.

Prosecutors offices in Ankara and Diyarbakir also launched investigations of Demirtas, and Justice Minister Bekir Bozdogan said that Demirtas' statements were “treason, a crime and unacceptable.”

The PKK's calculations emerged on December 24 in a lengthy featured interview by PKK official Cemil Bayik in *Le Monde*. In this interview, the French bourgeoisie's paper of record gave a sympathetic platform for the PKK to announce the formation of a “Revolutionary Front of Resistance” of Kurdish groups inside and outside Turkey to fight a war against Ankara. Bayik said all these groups “share our struggle and will fight with us against the regime of Erdogan.”

Bayik compared the fighting in Turkey to the five-year bloodbath in Syria: “What has taken place in Syrian cities over the last years is now happening similarly in Turkey. Supposedly to restore public order, the Turkish state is preparing to commit a massacre to which it wants to give a legal guise.”

He said that a Kurdish military escalation against Erdogan would enjoy support from sections of the US foreign policy establishment: “No offensive in Syria against ISIS is possible without Kurdish forces’ support, they are the best on the ground. The United States knows this perfectly well. ... I cannot imagine that Washington will cut off its ties with Syria's Kurds only to please Turkey.”

Bayik indicated that the Kurdish nationalist groups were preparing for a long-term war against Ankara. He told *Le Monde*, “In the coming months, the civil war in Turkey will escalate. It is occurring in the context of a regional war in which each pursues his interests, and in which no one can stand aside. ... The heart of the regional war is in Kurdistan, and it will continue to escalate until it produces a new situation.”

In Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, moved into territory west of the Euphrates river, as part of a US-backed alliance of Syrian Kurds and Arab rebel groups, after capturing a dam from ISIS on December 26. They cut off one of ISIS’ main supply routes across the Euphrates. Ankara has long insisted that it would view a decision by Syrian Kurds to cross onto the Euphrates' western bank as a “red line” that would provoke a Turkish military response.

The imperialist carve-up of the Middle East centered on the war in Syria and the military fallout from NATO's reckless policy of military confrontation with Russia are on the verge of producing a new military catastrophe in the Middle East. Turkey is threatened with a plunge into civil war, following Syria, as the conflict in Iraq and Syria spreads into Turkey itself.

The only force that can oppose the spread of war is the working class of the Middle East, mobilized independently both of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara and the Kurdish nationalist groups. Both play a reckless and reactionary role to escalate the conflict. Both Ankara on the one side and Kurdish nationalist groups on the other count on the support of various major powers or try to play in between to further their interests.

Ankara aims to get NATO's support by providing military bases and internment camps for refugees; the Kurdish nationalist groups, including the PKK, seek international recognition in return for Kurdish youth as cannon fodder for the imperialist intervention in Syria.



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