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Why is Turkey bombing the Kurds?

- Features -

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Given interlocking domestic, regional, and international developments, the AKP has launched attacks on ISIS and the PKK, the latter evidently being the main target, with four main objectives.

'War is the continuation of politics by other means', Clausewitz famously remarked. Nowhere is this maxim better in display than in Turkey's current dual-offensive against the 'Islamic State', also known as ISIS or ISIL, and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

For rather than being a policy U-turn, as it has generally been described in mainstream media, this offensive is essentially a new tactic by Turkey's ruling 'Justice and Development Party' (AKP) to extricate its grand strategy of domestic entrenchment and regional hegemony from a structural impasse central to which is the advancements of the Kurdish revolution in Turkey and Syria.

This is why and how.

AKP and neo-Ottoman restoration

The AKP came to power in 2002. It supplanted the crisis-stricken Kemalist ruling class on a platform of social conservatism, fighting governmental corruption, and economic neoliberalism. It soon managed to curb the military's interference in politics, and more importantly, generate sustained economic growth, which led to an increase in its parliamentary majority in subsequent elections.

Emboldened by its successes the AKP adopted an ambitious strategy to end Turkey's traditional regional isolation and over-dependence on the US, and turn the country into a key regional and global power - a project grandiosely described as 'neo-Ottomanism'. This was rooted in the AKP's peculiar blend of Islamist transnationalism and Turkish nationalism.

Neo-Ottomanism rested on Turkey's central location in the Afro-Euroasian landmass, the soft power of the AKP's 'moderate Islam', and, the geo-strategic deployment of the over-accumulating Turkish capital in the region.

Initially the AKP sought to establish Turkey as the transit route of choice for Russian, central Asian, and Iranian natural gas to Europe. This required the resolution of the ongoing conflict with the PKK in the country's southeastern regions, through which the proposed transit routes had to pass.

Resolving the Kurdish question would also attract Kurdish votes, which the AKP needed in its domestic political entrenchment vis-à-vis its Kemalist opposition, and later, the Gülen movement, a Sufi-oriented brand of Islamism that dominated the police and judiciary in the early years of the AKP rule, which was later attacked by the AKP, however, who came to see it as a 'parallel state' and danger to the AKP's monopoly of power.

During the same period the PKK had revised its separatist program and advocated a non-state solution to the Kurdish question through 'democratic confederalism', a synthetic model of gender-egalitarian and eco-conscious communal socialism where the identitarian hierarchy of the nation-state was to be replaced by a social contract

among equal and mutually recognized cultural communities.

These developments paved the way for peace talks between the AKP government and the PKK, which culminated in a ceasefire in 2013.

During the same period the AKP also established a 'strategic partnership' with Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), the party which increasingly dominated Iraqi Kurdistan.

This partnership gave Turkey a near monopoly over Iraqi Kurdistan's market, particularly its construction sector in real estate and expanding oil industry infrastructure. Turkey also became the exclusive transit route for the export of the Iraqi Kurdistan's oil, increasingly the lifeline for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) - dominated by the PDK - given the KRG's unresolved dispute with Baghdad over the federal budget.

Equally importantly, Barzani also shared the AKP's objective of containing the PKK whose socialist-libertarian project was a threat to his tribal authoritarian politics.

Arab Spring: an opportunity turns into a threat

Then came the Arab Spring.

Armed with its 'neo-liberalism with an Islamic face', restless Turkish capital, and a symbolic anti-Israeli stance, the AKP believed it could utilize seismic political changes in the region as a fast track to regional hegemony.

But the initial successes of the AKP's fellow Islamists were short-lived. Morsi was ousted in Egypt, Islamists lost power in Tunisia, and Libya plunged into civil war.

Left with Syria to contend with the AKP completely reversed its erstwhile 'zero problems with neighbours' policy and made a strategic commitment to the overthrow of Bashar Assad.

Thus, the AKP turned Turkey into the main conduit of military and financial support for Syria's armed Sunni opposition groups including ISIS, and foreign jihadists, which earned Turkey growing international isolation and recrimination.

But as the conflict prolonged, Turkey faced a more immediate, and potentially dangerous challenge: the growing power of the Syrian Kurds who had close political and ideological links with the PKK. Led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syrian Kurds established three autonomous cantons and self-defense forces known as YPG and YPJ, which quickly emerged as the most effective anti-ISIS force in Syria.

The rise of the Syrian Kurds diminished Turkey's influence in Syria, weakened the AKP's position vis-a-vis the PKK, and challenged the influence of Barzani's PDK both in Syria and Iraq, where pro-PKK forces also played a key role in the anti-ISIS campaign.

Thus, Turkish policy duly shifted towards the containment of the Syrian Kurds through a policy of 'active neutrality'

towards ISIS. This reached a climax during the siege of Kobane by ISIS when Turkey prevented reinforcements reaching the town while the AKP's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gleefully declared 'Kobane will fall'.

HDP: AKP's coup de grâce

Amidst all this turmoil, the AKP's all-important domestic policy of constitutional entrenchment through establishing a presidential system with extensive power for the presidency, came to a grinding halt in the June 2015 elections in which the AKP lost its parliamentary majority.

The AKP's electoral defeat was largely due to the unexpected success of the Kurdish-led but nationally constituted Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

The HDP offered a pluralist and inclusive election manifesto in which Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights were incorporated into a wider programme for radical democracy and the empowerment of women and marginalized social groups. This gave the HDP a nationwide appeal beyond its Kurdish heartland, attracting many left and left-liberal Turkish voters.

Another contributory factor was the Turkish aftershock of the Arab Spring, that is, the Gezi Park protest movement in 2013. It united democratic forces opposed to the AKP's growing authoritarianism and aggressive neoliberalism. The police brutality gave the Turkish protesters a small taste of what the Kurds had been enduring for decades, and paved the way for a closer understanding and cooperation between sections of the Turkish secular and left opposition, and the Kurds, which boosted the HDP's election campaign.

In the event, the HDP won more than 13% of the votes despite a sustained campaign of provocation, intimidation and subversion by the government.

Blood for votes

Concurrently, the Syrian Kurds achieved major victories over ISIS. The watershed was the liberation of the border town of Tal Abyaz, which deprived ISIS of its key logistical route to Turkey. The Kurds were now poised to advance further to the west and incorporate their third isolated canton of Afrin near Aleppo to the now interlinked Kobane and Jezira cantons in the northeast.

This would create a geographically contiguous Kurdish semi-state stretching from the border of Iraqi Kurdistan with Turkey and Iran, where the PKK has its bases, to the Mediterranean; and seriously endanger Turkey's ambitions in Syria, and the wider region.

It could also remove Iraqi Kurdistan from Turkey's geo-political orbit by offering it an alternative route for exporting its oil, and strategically weaken the AKP's key Kurdish partner Barzani's PDK.

Moreover, the successful conclusion of the nuclear talks between Iran and the west exacerbated Turkey's regional isolation and seemed to further diminish its role in the region.

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It is against this complex background of interlocking domestic, regional, and international developments that the AKP has launched its attacks on ISIS and the PKK, the latter evidently being the main target. In doing so the AKP has four main objectives.

First, it seeks to decisively win the likely snap elections in November by attracting Turkish ultra-nationalist voters through projecting a strong anti-Kurdish image.

Second, it hopes to directly check the growth of Kurdish power in Syria by formally joining the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, given that the AKP's wager on ISIS to contain the Kurds has failed.

Third, by entering the Syrian fray, Turkey also wants to re-optimize relations with the US, which in return for access to Turkish airbases has reportedly acceded to the Turkish demand for creating a 'safe zone' along parts of Turkish-Syrian border, which Turkey hopes will become a barrier to the Kurds' further advance.

And finally, the bombing campaign against the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan also aims to boost the AKP's key ally there, Massoud Barzani, who is currently seeking an unconstitutional third term in office as the region's president. A Turkish bombing campaign inside Iraqi Kurdistan is intended to strengthen his position by convincing the people and main political parties that given his links to the AKP, Barzani is the leader who can handle the Turks best under such unstable circumstances.

What next?

The AKP's anti-Kurdish and anti-left campaign and macho-chauvinist propaganda is unlikely to re-attract Kurdish conservatives whose disillusionment with the AKP over Kobane is being reinforced by the current bombing campaign of Kurdistan. The AKP's bloody ploy is also unlikely to sway Turkish nationalist voters away from their traditional parties. So unless AKP's care-taker government closes down the HDP, which the HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş claims is on the AKP's agenda, the early elections might not produce the AKP's intended result. But the closure is already being opposed by the main opposition party – Republican People's Party (CHP).

Moreover, Turkey's current, US-demanded distinction between the PKK and the Syrian Kurds, who have been receiving coalition air-support against ISIS, and the proposed 'ISIS-free zone' might in fact aid the Syrian Kurds' attempt at reaching their currently isolated canton of Afrin near Aleppo. This possibility is reinforced by the strong reluctance of both US and Turkey to deploy ground troops inside Syria, and by the fact that the Syrian Kurds have established cordial relations with a number of Arab opposition forces such as Burkan al-Furat.

Furthermore, as the experience of the previous 30 years demonstrates, the PKK cannot be militarily eliminated. And no state has ever been able to exercise direct control over the Qandil Mountains where the PKK has been based for the past 20 years or so.

Finally, the Kurds are highly unlikely to relent in their fight against ISIS, which is an existential threat to them. But most ordinary Kurds, if not all Kurdish political parties, will certainly consider the US support for Turkey's bombing of the PKK as yet another demonstration of America's treachery.

So all in all, the AKP's active war with the PKK and passive war against the Syrian Kurds involves high risks and could easily backfire and spell the end of its political power domestically while severely undermining Turkey's ability to exercise influence in Syria.

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As Clausewitz also noted, 'everything is very simple in War, but the simplest thing is difficult'.

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