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Turkey

# The World's Eyes are on Turkey

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**The situation in Turkey is changing quickly, but to see where things are now, it is useful to look back at the events of the last seven months. On 7 June 2015 the broad left-wing and pro-Kurdish HDP achieved over 13% of the vote in the Turkish general election, apparently a big victory, breaking the electoral threshold to win 80 seats, and depriving President Erdogan's AKP Party of both his overall parliamentary majority needed for the AKP to govern alone, and the supermajority he needed to move to a stronger presidential system of government.**

## The background

But between 25 and 28 June more than 200 civilians were killed in Kobani by ISIS in a surprise attack, as the Turkish army continued to ignore or assist ISIS attacks on the Syrian Kurds, and on 11 July the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) issued a statement explaining that the numerous Turkish military violations of the 2 year old ceasefire in Turkey would no longer be tolerated, and that for example, every effort would be made by the Kurdish people, including the guerrillas, to stop the construction of dams for military purposes. [1] On 16 July the People's defence forces announced that guerrillas were conducting warning actions in response to sharply increased Turkish military activity including bombardments in guerrilla defence areas. [2] On 17 July Erdogan repudiated the "Dolmabahçe Accords" of February 28 as a basis for peace between Turkey and the Kurdish side, a clear signal that the peace process was over and the war beginning again. On 23 July the US and Turkey reached agreement that Turkey would enter the so-called anti-ISIS coalition and that the US could use the Incirlik airbase near Diyarbakir. [3] This was spun by a sceptical media as a sign that Turkey might start to deal with ISIS, as opposed to ignoring it or assisting it. Within 48 hours of the agreement, Turkey had made a few bombing runs over ISIS territory in Syria, (after which little more was heard about this aspect of the campaign [4]) and began a systematic air campaign against guerrilla camps in Northern Iraq which has continued unbroken up to now. After a period of half-hearted attempts to form a coalition government, on 24 August Erdogan called a fresh election for November 1. This was run in an atmosphere of blatant intimidation after more than 100 attacks on HDP party offices and the bombing of a peace rally called by labour movement organisations and the HDP on 10 October in which 102 people were killed and more than 400 injured. No group claimed the bombing but it is widely thought to have been carried out by people with connections to ISIS. The HDP's vote still got them over the threshold, but the AKP's vote rose just enough for the party to get an overall majority.

## Self-rule and resistance

From early August 2015 local assemblies in Kurdistan Turkey began declaring self-rule, and this was confirmed by the meeting of the Democratic People's Congress on 28 December 2015 [5] after Erdogan's AKP stole the re-run election of November 1, the idea is to build the strongest possible local self-organisation as a means of self-defence and as a step on the road to freedom from the persecution of the Turkish state. Youths initially dug ditches and put up barricades to deny entrance to these areas to the police and army. Even though in many of these areas neighbourhoods have now been literally under siege by 10,000 troops on and off for months the Turkish army, police and special forces have not been able to retake them though they have driven out some residents. The worst sieges are of the cities of Cizre and Silopi, in ?irnak province, and of Sur, the historic old city centre of Diyarbakir, currently under heavy mortar bombardment by the Turkish army which has been trying for more than 40 days to recapture neighbourhoods under control of the new PKK-linked youth self-defence forces and the local population. A People's

Council representative in Cizre has today (18 Jan) called for an uprising throughout Kurdistan to support the Kurdish resistance. The resistance is in its 33rd day in Silopi, where neighbourhoods are frequently under tank fire and 26 civilians have been killed, but the state has conceded lifting of the curfew during daylight hours from 19 Jan. HDP MP Ferhat Encü says things are far worse than after the military coup in 1980. The latest figures are that 283 civilians have been killed in the sieges since 12 July [6] while 300,000 people are estimated to have been driven out of their homes in the depths of winter. The left needs to wake up to the fact that the Kurdish war has come down from the mountains into the cities and that thousands of people are putting up a heroic resistance to a major NATO ally that has said repeatedly that it will crush the resistance street by street, and do some serious solidarity work.

The umbrella group KCK Komên Civakên Kurdistan (Group of Communities in Kurdistan) has called on people to stay and support the resistance if they are able to, though many people have retreated to other districts, as the situation is very dangerous with people being at sight by army snipers or killed by the shelling, while the state has cut off water and electricity. It should be noted that the centres of resistance are Kurdish cities in the south east which have suffered repression for seventy years, plus discrimination and high unemployment, and where HDP received very high votes in the elections both in June and November 2015, and are near to Rojava and Kurdistan Iraq.

As People's Defence Forces commander Murat Karayılan said in his New Year message: "The AKP has unleashed a furious attack on us. The guerrillas and also the youth in the cities, all parts of Kurdish society, are playing their part in the resistance". Self-defence units have been announced in more and more places, the latest being a women's unit in Nusaybin. The participation of women in the struggle grows all the time, and clearly the resilience of the women and their determination to fight for freedom is a huge strength of the movement. Overall the resistance against the might of the Turkish state is a remarkable achievement and perhaps goes some way to explain the silence of other NATO members.

## Relating to the rest of society

Looking at the Turkish state as a whole, Tariq Ali conducted an interesting interview on Telesur called "Turkey is a boiling society" in which Sungur Savran singles out landmark events of the last three years: June – September 2013 the Gezi uprising, 6-12 October 2014 the serhildan (uprising) in Kurdish areas of Turkey with millions on the street, and "when it became clear that PKK had armed units in even the smallest towns", and metal workers' strike 2015 when in May tens of thousands rose up first against yellow unions and then against the bosses, in a wave spreading from Bursa to Izmir, Ankara, Istanbul, a promising development because the workers movement had been largely dormant for many years. Savran argued that secular forces in big cities of Turkey, petit bourgeoisie and upper layers of the working class who used to vote CHP (Ataturk's old party, nationalist but social democratic) now understand what has been done to the Kurds and are becoming sympathetic and starting to vote HDP; it is vital for socialists to continue to work to draw this bloc into the HDP orbit. He also notes that Erdogan has begun to actively mobilise right-wing death-squads (partly because he cannot rely entirely on the still-secular army linked to NATO) to use against the working class in Turkey, and against leftists, Alevis and Kurds. This was one of the reasons that people decided to put up the barricades – they knew they would have to defend themselves sooner or later.

The most recent developments which have linked the west of Turkey to the war on the Kurds in the south-east are the bomb which killed 10 mainly German tourists in Istanbul, and the issue of the Academics for Peace statement, which was signed by over 1000 academics in Turkey and many outside. The academics who signed the statement calling for peace and for an end to the repression have been accused of treachery, and threatened both by Erdogan, and by well-known crime boss Sedat Peker. All signatories are under criminal investigation, many have been arrested, some have already been sacked from their jobs, with reports of pressure being applied such as prominent marks being put on signatories' office doors, and a movement is rapidly gathering in their defence, which fortunately has become rapidly internationalised, and has received considerable media coverage, as Erdogan has perhaps

unwisely extended his criticism to Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali, well known supporters of liberation struggles who signed the statement. At the last count 299 academics in Britain had rushed to sign a statement of support. Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali have said they will only go to Turkey if invited by the Kurdish people and the HDP, in response to invitations to them by president Erdogan. Both HDP and the People's Republican Party CHP have condemned the threats by Erdogan and expressed concern at the path which he is pushing the society along. HDP MP Faysal Sariyildiz has invited Chomsky to visit the Kurdistan region and has invited Erdogan and Davutoglu to visit with him to see the situation for himself, accompanying the invitations with very graphic statement describing conditions under the siege, which can be read here: <http://anfenglish.com/features/hdp-invites-chomsky-to-kurdistan>

## Turkey in Syria and Iraq

It is misleading to look at the activities of the Turkish state in Turkey in isolation: their policy in their near abroad should also be understood. It must be noted that the Turkish state is deeply involved in military and other interference in northern Syria and northern Iraq, bidding to reclaim its former regional power, via self-serving attempts to exploit the legitimate grievances of the opposition to the regime in Syria, along with a last-ditch attempt to block the struggle of the Kurdish people and their allies both in Syria and northern Iraq.

Just to give a broad outline on the Kurdish struggle in Syria, the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its military wing the YPG (People's Defence Forces) in Syria said consistently that they would defend their own areas if attacked and they have done that. They are currently still defending the three majority Kurdish and mixed self-declared autonomous cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira (Qamishli and Hasakah), and the mainly Kurdish area of Shaikh Maqsud in Aleppo. Battles to break the isolation of the western canton of Afrin and to defend Sheikh Maqsud, recently bombed by the regime and currently under heavy attack again by Al Nusra and Ahrar Al Sham forces, and to cut the supply lines from Turkey and ISIS's supply lines east via Raqqa and Shengal to Mosul, are taking place at the moment. Erdogan notoriously said that if the Kurds crossed west of the Euphrates this would be a red line for Turkey; this happened recently when the Syrian Democratic Forces, (the new name for the Kurdish defence forces and their allies which include Arab and some Assyrian units) crossed the Euphrates and took the Tishrin Dam and its surrounding area from ISIS. Presumably the attitude of the US is that the Syrian Kurdish forces are currently useful for keeping ISIS within bounds, as are the PUK peshmerga in Iraq; and that in due course Turkey will be free to deal with both. Obviously most of the Kurdish people have a different ambition – survival, self-determination, and democratisation of the whole of the Middle East, and it is the job of socialists to stand with them.

The Turkish state wants both to crush all resistance and to take back the lands lost by the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. The Turkish army established bases in Northern Iraq in 1991 under the cloak of the no-fly zone, ostensibly set up to protect the Kurds of Iraq from Saddam Hussein. The bases were used in 1996 in co-operation with the KDP to attack PKK guerrillas. The Turkish army made an unsuccessful attack on PKK bases on 26 December 2007 and after fierce fighting in which the areas under attack were also defended by PUK peshmergas who rushed north from Sulaimaniyah and the surrounding area, the Turkish army had to retreat hastily with heavy losses; the army made various further forays over that winter. The new Kurdistan Parliament voted in 2008 that the bases should be removed, and the Prime Minister of the KRG Nechivan Barzani confirmed that the Turkish bases would be shut, but nothing happened. At the end of 2011 US and NATO "troop trainers" left Iraq over failure to agree immunity from prosecution for US troops' actions; the withdrawal of the main bulk of the American forces took place between December 2007 and 2011. In 2012 the Iraqi government said that the Turkish bases had to be closed. So by this time US and other NATO forces that had been in Iraq since 2003 had largely withdrawn; but the number of Turkish forces only increased. The presence of the Turkish troops was not popular; petitions with 470,000 signatures were collected in South Kurdistan and delivered to the Kurdistan Parliament and to the Regional Presidency in 2012, and with almost 1,000,000 to the Parliament and to the Regional Government in 2015, but were ignored.

The current situation in Kurdistan Iraq is potentially explosive. Turkey and other NATO members are well aware that the people in South Kurdistan are furious at the corruption and inefficiency of their government, even if the situation is less calamitous than in the rest of Iraq. NATO policy is to deliberately support Barzani's KDP party as a counterweight to the more radical base of the PUK in Sulaimani and Kirkuk, and to the increasing presence of guerrillas allied to or belonging to the PKK, who have been at large in South Kurdistan, not just in the mountain refuge of Qandil, since the rise of ISIS and the fall of Shengal and Mosul in 2014. At this moment PUK peshmergas and PKK and YJA Star guerrillas are jointly holding off a heavy ISIS assault in the south of Kirkuk, and it has also not escaped the attention of the Kurdish fighters that Turkish army forces in Northern Iraq are well-placed to engage in a race for Mosul should ISIS come under too much pressure there, or even to move against the PUK "Green Zone" if there is an upsurge of the mass movement against corruption and poverty – perhaps NATO and Turkey even see an increasing presence of the Turkish army in Northern Iraq as a substitute for the US army.

## Break the silence

Despite periodic speculation that the US and EU member states dislike some of Turkey's policies, ever since the AKP disowned the Dolmabahçe Accords between the state side and the Kurdish side and restarted the war in July, there have few comments from other NATO members other than terse statements of support for Turkey's right to defend its national security. As winter deepens and the Turkish army bombards Kurdish cities because it has not been able to retake them, there is a deafening silence from other governments.

On 18 January Prime Minister Davutoglu visited to David Cameron and five people were arrested in Whitehall as police tried to prevent protesters outside 10 Downing Street from making their views known, the whole incident clearly showing which side the British government is on, if there were any doubt.

On the evening of 19 January there are reports that the Turkish army has crossed the border into Syria at Jarablus, the last ISIS-held crossing point on the Turkish border, with no reaction from ISIS forces in the area. [7] This comes amid an outburst of media speculation that the UN Syria talks will be postponed because Turkey refuses to accept that there should be Kurdish representation on the opposition side at the talks.

## Actions, contacts and resources in Britain

– Sign or publicise the Academics for Peace statement and the supporting statement from academics in Britain [here](#).

– Look out for details, to be announced soon, of national solidarity demonstration on Sunday 6 March – Break the Silence! Stop Turkey's war on the Kurds! Unban the PKK!

– For announcements of emergency protests, see [Free Youth Facebook page](#), [Solidarity with People of Turkey Facebook page](#) or [Kurdish Revolution Information Page](#).

– To get weekly briefings from Peace in Kurdistan campaign on events arranged by and in solidarity with the Kurdish movement, contact [estella24@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:estella24@tiscali.co.uk).

– Write to your MP.

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– To give medical aid you can donate money to [Kurdish Red Moon – Heyva Sor a KurdistanÃª](#) at Fairfax Hall 11  
Portland Gardens  
London N4 IHU  
Registered Charity No: 10 93 741  
Company No: 42 85 714  
Bank Sort code: 20 46 60  
Bank Account No: 40 91 23 87

Source [Left Unity](#).

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[1] ANF News [KCK: We will not accept the violation of the ceasefire anymore.](#)

[2] ANF News [Warning action by guerrillas in response to Turkish military activity.](#)

[3] *Washington Post* [Turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State.](#)

[4] *Washington Post* [turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State.](#)

[5] DP [Turkey's Kurds call for self-rule.](#)

[6] Kurdish Info [List of civil casualties during the Turkish State's Operations.](#)

[7] ANF News [ANHA: Turkish army has entered Jarablus.](#)