

Turkey's Securitization of the Kurdish Issue: A Dangerous Strategy

by [Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Mar 31, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/trkya-tdfy-altab-alamny-ly-qlqdyt-alkrdyt-astratyjyt-khtyrt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Maurizio Geri is an analyst on peace, security and defense for different think tanks and NATO, based in Rome and Brussels. Geri is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Articles & Testimony

March 31, 2016

The recent attack in Ankara, killing 34 people and injuring dozens more, has been quickly blamed on the PKK, even as a few days later the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) a break-away faction of PKK, claimed responsibility. The attack was only the latest in a series of attacks across the country and within the capital within the last six months, causing hundreds of deaths. Blame for these attacks has varied, with ISIS and the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK)—a breakaway faction of PKK—claiming responsibility for two of the attacks. Yet the responsibility for these attacks is far from straightforward; the state can swiftly blame a group citing “serious evidence” implicating the group, besides imposing media restrictions and blocking social media, but when said group generally attacks military targets the situation starts to become blurred.

Turkey is one of the Middle East region's most critical countries: a Western ally surrounded by the chaos of the Levant, a bridge country between Europe and Asia, and a fundamental pillar of the NATO security system. Turkey nevertheless suffers from major internal security challenges, ranging from revolutionary communist forces on one side like the TAK, which supports a Kurdish independence, and ultra-nationalist fascist on the other, including the Grey Wolves who fight against a peaceful solution to Kurdish nationalism. Turkey has also existed in a state of permanent democratic transition since its founding. Today, a moderate Islamist party has gained control of Turkey's parliament for the first time without military opposition, but with this democratic step forward has come increased authoritarianism and social polarization. Moreover, Turkey has recently almost completely repressed the freedom of speech and press; those who try to investigate or harshly criticize the Turkish government are either put in jail or under state control. Zaman, the country's biggest selling newspaper, was recently subjected to this treatment.

And even with Turkey's myriad challenges, its biggest problem is its lack of social peace. Turkey had appeared to overcome this internal instability through the AKP's efforts to create an inclusive country in the first years of the 21st century. But since the Gezi Park protests in 2013, Turkey's social peace has dissolved and increased since the summer of 2015. Then, the June general elections and the Suruc bombing restarted the war between the government and the PKK that had laid dormant for several years. This lack of social peace is reflected by the polarization today between the youth and the elders, the leftist and the conservatives, and mostly between the Turks

and the Kurds, or at least between those who identify as Turkish and those who identify as Kurdish. The AKP regime has contributed to this polarization considerably through its recent “securitization” of the Kurdish issue by the AKP regime. The AKP’s decision to heighten confrontation with the PKK, which it and its allies consider a terrorist organization, has further polarized Turkish society and eroded social peace.

Now, the relationship between the Turkish government and the PKK is beginning to resemble that of the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers before the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009. I worked for Nonviolent Peaceforce, an American NGO, in Sri Lanka during 2008. The Tamil Tigers implemented a similar escalation of terrorist bombings during this period. In the governmental response was unexpected: it crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam with an army offensive. This operation caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties, and although it brought an end to the conflict it merely smothered rather than solved the underlying issue. Today there are worrying signs that the Turkish government may replicate that strategy of handling its internal conflict. This path would be a disaster, engendering great human suffering and stunting the strategic options for the future of Turkey. While the LTTE had no place to flee from the Sri Lankan island, the PKK could retreat into the Kurdish regions outside the Turkish border, drawing the country and potentially other regional powers into an international war.

In the face of such an outcome, it is puzzling why the Turkish government does not appear to be interested in pursuing a method of conflict resolution in line with Northern Ireland’s IRA, Spain’s ETA, or even Indonesia’s GAM – autonomy for the contested Aceh region in 2005 after thirty years of war. Many considerations could be preventing a more conciliatory approach, including geopolitical issues connected with the wars on Turkey’s borders, but it seems that the primary driving force is the AKP government and the elites’ interest in retaining political power. To share power with some form of Kurdish autonomous region would jeopardize Erdogan’s plan to transform Turkey’s current parliamentary system into a centralized, presidential Republic. This interest became clearer after the AKP changed its strategy in response to its lost electoral ground in the June 2015 elections. The AKP completely reversed its policy of engaging in official peace talks with the PKK to re-starting a war, seemingly implementing a securitization concept from the Copenhagen School.

According to this theory, a government removes an issue from the political sphere when it wants to treat it as an exclusive national security concern, allowing the state to employ extraordinary measures justified for security threat but inappropriate for political disputes. When the Turkish government realized political dealings with the PKK were not tactically beneficial, the AKP began to recast the group in terms of security and implement extraordinary measures used for the securitization of Kurdish concerns. Government actions have killed hundreds of civilians during these maneuvers, but the Eastern region of Turkey is quickly becoming what political scientist Giorgio Agamben deems a “state of exception.” Many towns live under imposed curfews, and there has been forced displacement and even destruction of parts of Kurdish cities – in particular the city of Cizre but also others including Sur, Silopi, Idil and Nusyabin.

Several international human rights groups actions condemned what they term ‘abusive’ use of force in this area. In contrast, the European Union and the rest of the international community has remained silent, presumably because of the necessity of Turkey’s support in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis and the war against ISIS. However, these actions have had consequences, and the increasing social polarization has fueled the upswing in terrorist attacks and subsequent instability visible in Turkey today. The AKP’s increasingly authoritarian approach has not kept Turkey safe, and if the AKP government does not attempt some sort of reconciliation with the PKK and refocuses its efforts on moving Turkey forward, the damages to the democratization process may become permanent.

Moreover, the AKP and Erdogan are building a narrative of delegitimation against all who criticize government

actions. Their targets have included journalists, activists, academics, and even diplomats. Academics who signed a petition of “Academics for Peace” against government intervention in the Eastern region have been harassed. And the day after the most recent Ankara attack, Erdogan declared that, “There is no difference between a terrorist who carries a gun and those who use their positions to put everything at the terrorists’ disposal so they can achieve their aims. They can be an academic, a politician, an author, a journalist, or someone from an NGO. They are still terrorists.” A few days ago he even criticized foreign envoys for attending the Cumhuriyet journalists’ trial: “We all see who those who always talk about democracy, human rights, freedom side with when officials elected with public support face off with coup plotters.” of the climate that Erdogan is building that relies on constant intimidation shows the far-reaching consequences of its securitization policy and works against Turkish democracy.

Maurizio Geri is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant in International Studies at Old Dominion University. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8976#.VwJDAeIrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8976#.VwJDAeIrLIU). ❖

Fikra Forum

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)