

# The Economic Dimension of Peace in Turkey

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President Erdogan's approach to securing the loyalties of Turkey's Kurdish populace has taken many forms: granting Kurds stronger civil rights, extending the olive branch to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) insurgency, and permitting the first pro-Kurdish party to gain Parliament seats in a country where political organizations too out of step with the ruling administration are swiftly removed from power. Yet none of these policies led to a secure peace. Even with greater political representation in hand and a two-year cease-fire between the government and the PKK, the Kurdish southeast imploded last summer. Estimates show that approximately 300 Turkish soldiers and 5,000 PKK militants have died since clashes renewed in July 2015. Meanwhile, terrorism has metastasized into a significant national problem as a number of both ISIS and PKK-inspired suicide bombers have struck Ankara and Istanbul within the past two months.

Like many of his predecessors, Erdogan is now determined to settle the conflict with military force. But the way to beat the PKK is to spur economic growth in Turkey's Kurdish southeast. Erdogan must put into place a strong security presence in the southeast – but these military forces should be defense-oriented and act as security forces. Currently, these forces are destructive rather than constructive. These same soldiers could effectively be assigned to guard key infrastructure projects and might have prevented PKK operatives from attacking sites like the Ilisu and Silvan Dams, which were planned to employ approximately 300,000 people. Instead, these forces have demolished shops and even entire commercial districts as part of major offensives to cleanse cities of PKK fighters

The economic gap between the Kurdish southeast and the rest of Turkey is too polarizing for political solutions alone to prevail. While Turkey's Kurds have won several long-sought civil and political rights battles since the PKK launched an armed struggle against the state in 1984, poverty in southeastern Kurdish communities remains undefeated and a major driving force behind instability in Turkey, as well as in neighboring Syria and Iraq. Three decades of intermittent fighting has crippled infrastructure and frightened off investments from southeast Turkey, the PKK's stronghold, leaving local economies in tatters and vulnerable to extremism. Some stores in Diyarbakir, a major regional business hub, have reported losses in revenue of 80 percent and hotels struggle to fill rooms due to the most recent waves of violence. According to 2015 data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, about a third of people in Turkey living under the poverty line reside in the southeastern provinces.

PKK recruits are generally easy to locate: they are the impoverished youth of Southeastern Turkey. A study by

International Terrorism and Transnational Crime Research Center investigating why youths joined the PKK revealed that “four out of every five PKK terrorists said he or she was unemployed before joining the PKK.” Moreover, the three cities with the highest unemployment rates in 2015 were all in the Kurdish southeast. An ample supply of young Kurds needing income but lacking work opportunities has translated into fruitful recruiting grounds for PKK operatives flush with cash.

Erdogan himself said that “If we solve this problem, then investments can boom,” in April 2013 when commenting on the impact of concluding ceasefire negotiations with the PKK. Yet in April 2015 a construction contractor told Reuters that “I was finished off by banks and money lenders. There's no economy, no factories. Now I just kill time here like everyone else.” High unemployment numbers—which likely fall somewhere between the 15 percent reported by the government and 40 percent claimed by local businessmen in mid-2015—tell a similar story: the post-ceasefire financial boom envisioned by Erdogan never happened.

This is partly because Erdogan’s government hasn’t properly managed its investments in the southeast. What pledges the AKP did make to refinance the 40-year old Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP)—a series of dam, agricultural and power plant projects aimed at supporting the region’s development—have produced more skepticism than results. In a November 2014 interview Burc Baysal, head of the Industrialists and Businessmen association in Diyarbakir, told Bloomberg that “About 80 percent of GAP may have been completed in terms of energy supplies but only 12 percent of the irrigation canals are completed...What is really needed is irrigation to improve agriculture in arid lands and people’s lives.” Ensuring profits not only reach Ankara and western Turkey but also the communities housing the GAP projects must be a priority for Erdogan.

Admittedly, redoubling on economic development efforts will not ensure the allegiance of all current and prospective PKK members. But the relationship between economic development and political stability is significant and goes both ways. Alleviating southeastern Kurds’ destitution is a key missing component of the now deteriorating peace process with the PKK and the assurance of stability in the region. Without economic support, political and military maneuvers will not be enough to prevent Turkey from slipping into violence.

*Ben Sollenberger is a writer and editor based in Washington D.C. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8990&lang=en#.Vv554eIrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8990&lang=en#.Vv554eIrLIU). ❖*

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