

Turkey's Divisions Are So Deep They Threaten Its Future

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Oct 19, 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

President Erdogan needs to focus on fighting the terrorist threat, not his political opponents.

It is highly likely that the twin bombs that killed at least 100 people in Ankara last Saturday were the work of Isis. The best Turkish and American intelligence suggests this. Yet, since the massacre, the Turkish government and the opposition have been blaming each other for being complicit in the carnage.

Isis has a strategic game here: it is aware of Turkey's deep polarisation and, by not taking responsibility for the bombing, it hopes to deepen the chasm and even provoke conflict. The country's polarisation is rooted in 13 years of rule by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). An ultra-conservative and rightwing politician, Erdogan has produced economic growth and his successes have built a loyal, conservative voter base. Erdogan's supporters, constituting about 40% of the electorate, adore him. In December 2013, when Erdogan faced corruption allegations, his supporters started showing up at AKP rallies shrouded in *kefen* (the white cloth in which dead Muslims are shrouded before being buried), symbolising that they were committed to go as far as sacrificing their lives for him.

But if his supporters will die for him, his opponents hate him. This is in no small part due to the dark side of his electoral strategy, which has won him total victory until this past election. In order to maintain power, Erdogan brutalises his opponents politically: jailing dissidents and journalists, intimidating unsupportive businesses through targeted tax audits or sending police to crack down violently on peaceful opposition rallies.

Erdogan's electoral strategy is based on one premise: beat up those who dissent from the AKP's conservative worldview to shore up the party's rightwing base. This tactic explains his decision in July to declare war on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), just after the Kurdish community, previously a bastion of AKP support, abandoned the party in droves in the June election.

What ultimately brought the Kurds together was Erdogan's "wait and see" policy on Kobani, a Syrian-Kurdish

enclave controlled by a PKK-aligned Syrian-Kurdish group, when it came under Isis attack in September last year. His refusal to intercede in the conflict to prevent the bloodshed appalled his conservative Kurdish base, driving them away from the AKP.

Having abandoned Erdogan, the Kurds have become fair game for his political oppression. They now join a growing list of other groups that have suffered: liberals, leftists and Alevis (who belong to a liberal branch of Islam).

However, Erdogan's oppression of the Kurds is a dangerous one: unlike other groups in the anti-Erdogan block, the PKK will fight with weapons. Previously, when most Kurds supported the AKP, Ankara only had to focus on the military aspect of fighting the PKK to win the popular battle.

Now that appears unlikely. And with the inclusion of the Kurds, the anti-Erdogan block is now as powerful as the pro-Erdogan block.

The election outcome also disrupted Erdogan's plans to change the country's parliamentary democracy into a presidential one, with himself at the helm. Erdogan stepped down as Turkish prime minister in August 2014 due to an AKP statute which limits elected office to party officials to three terms, and subsequently took the post of presidency. Although the Turkish constitution says that the prime minister is head of government and the president, a non-partisan figure, is head of state, Erdogan has been running the government and the AKP from behind the scenes. In July, he intervened in coalition talks between the AKP and the main opposition party, Republican Peoples Party (CHP), leading to their collapse. And he had the final say in determining party leadership at the AKP's convention last month. Accordingly, a third of the AKP's new 50-seat central governing board, which will take the AKP into elections on 1 November, has close personal or business ties to Erdogan. Polls indicate that snap elections would not change much in the parliament or for Erdogan. Political polarisation trumps all other concerns and few people in the pro- and anti-AKP camps are likely to change their minds. This leaves Turkey with no functioning government, potentially violent political conflict and two -- to put it mildly -- bad neighbours, namely the Assad regime and Isis.

Turkey can avoid a bleak future. Given the country's deep divisions, the only way out is for Erdogan to return to the powers defined for his office by the Turkish constitution: a non-partisan president who is not in charge of government. There is no evidence that Erdogan will accept this or that doing so would heal the damage he's done, especially when it comes to Syria.

Turkey will remain exposed to the civil war there and Russian intervention in favour of the Assad regime will further complicate its position. Three of the four most deadly terror attacks in Turkey's history have taken place in the last two years -- killing at least 185 Turkish citizens -- and all three are due to the fallout from the Syrian war (one linked to the Assad regime, two to Isis).

In this regard, I am deeply worried by the Isis threat. When Turkey joined the US coalition against Isis in August, the question became not if, but when, Isis would attack.

What compounds the problem is that Turkey also faces an Isis problem from within. The Ankara bombings were carried out, it seems, by Turkish citizens who had gone into Syria to fight for Isis and become radicalised, only to return to Turkey to take part in suicide bombings against fellow citizens.

In Ankara, Isis specifically targeted an anti-government peace rally, organised by various leftist groups, similar to the July attack in Suruc, a Turkish town on the border with Syria, when it bombed a pro-Kurdish anti-government rally, killing 33 people. Following the Suruc bombing, the PKK blamed the Turkish government for the attack and executed off-duty police officers in retribution, ending a two-year ceasefire with Ankara. With this attack, Isis was able to end the peace talks between the government and the PKK, as well as starting the Turkish-Kurdish war.

Isis intentionally targets opposition rallies in Turkey to give the impression that the government will not protect those Turks who are against Erdogan, serving its goal of destabilising the country. With the Ankara bombing, Isis seems intent on triggering conflict between the pro- and anti-Erdogan camps that are already distrustful of each other.

If such a conflict starts (and I hope that I am wrong), Turkey will split in the middle, and all citizens will lose, including the Kurds, liberals, leftists, conservatives and Erdogan himself. Turkey would be well served to unite against Isis now.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

Guardian

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)