

Implications of Turkey's War Against the PKK

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Brief Analysis

Despite the broken ceasefire, leaders on both sides have political reasons to limit the violence, with Ocalan seeking to reassert his authority over the Kurdish nationalist movement and the AKP looking for a bump in the polls ahead of early elections.

The recent collapse of coalition government talks between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Republican People's Party (CHP) has increased the chances for early elections in Turkey this November. The domestic political maneuvering is also an important factor in Ankara's shifting policy on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). On July 24, Turkey began a bombing campaign against PKK bases in Iraq -- a development that followed the PKK's murder of three Turkish police and military officers on July 20 and 22. Now that the two-year ceasefire is over, who will be the winners of this fight, and what implications does it hold for U.S. policy?

BACKGROUND

The United States, NATO, and Ankara all consider the PKK a terrorist organization. Turkey fought the group for nearly four decades before entering formal peace talks with its founder, Abdullah Ocalan, in 2012. Jailed since 1999, Ocalan remains a charismatic and dominant personality who wields tremendous influence over the PKK and the broader Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey. Ankara had hoped that the talks would bring the PKK issue to a peaceful resolution and help defuse tensions with the group's Syrian franchise, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which controls enclaves across the border. The PYD has come to the forefront recently through its fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS, most notably its U.S.-supported campaign to defend the Kobane enclave.

On July 20, however, two deadly attacks spurred a Turkish reaction. An ISIS suicide bombing in the Turkish Kurdish town of Suruc, across the border from Kobane, killed thirty-two people, hastening Ankara's decision to let the United States use Turkish bases for strikes against ISIS targets in Syria after more than a year of negotiations on the issue.

The same day, the PKK killed a military officer and injured two soldiers in the southeastern province of Adiyaman, followed two days later by the murder of two police officers in Ceylanpinar, a town near Suruc; the group claimed the officers were complicit in the ISIS attack on Suruc. In response, Ankara launched attacks against the PKK on July 24, bombing the group's bases along the Qandil Mountains inside Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The PKK has retaliated by increasing its own attacks, killing at least twenty-one Turkish security officers since then.

Despite the growing violence, Turkey does not appear to be entering a period of cataclysmic bloodshed a la the 1990s, when the PKK conflict claimed hundreds of lives each month. Rather, the county appears to be experiencing a period of controlled conflict, with neither the PKK nor the government aiming for full-scale war.

MOTIVES OF TURKEY AND THE PKK

In the heyday of Turkey-PKK fighting, Ankara would typically launch cross-border operations against the group's camps deep inside the KRG, inflicting serious damage on its infrastructure and personnel. This time, Turkey is limiting itself to aerial strikes, and there is no evidence that these attacks are crippling the PKK or killing large numbers of its members.

Ankara's main goal in this process appears to be weakening the PKK. Some Turkish analysts assert that the group has taken advantage of the peace talks to set up an "underground state" in southeastern Turkey, complete with PKK- and Kurdish-run courts and tax offices -- in effect, the initial infrastructure for potential future Kurdish autonomy in Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP, and various nonpartisan policymakers believe limited strikes will pressure the group into returning to the negotiating table from a position of weakness, as it did in the past.

Although the PKK effectively ended the ceasefire by killing Turkish officers, it seems to have its own motives for controlling the violence. In the 1990s, the group carried out brazen attacks such as temporarily seizing Kurdish-majority towns in the southeast, bombing shopping malls, conducting suicide attacks, and carrying out mass executions of Turkish soldiers, all of which infuriated the Turkish public. This time, the group seems to be shying away from such incendiary tactics.

This apparent "restraint" may stem from the PKK's desire to bolster its military position over the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey. Recently, the movement's political wing has made great strides through the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). By incorporating various liberal and leftist elements, the HDP more than doubled its support from 6.5 percent of the vote in the 2011 elections to over 13 percent in the June 2015 parliamentary polls. This translated to 80 seats in the 550-seat legislature, tying the HDP for the third-largest bloc and establishing it as a peaceful force to be reckoned with in Turkish politics. Now, by reintroducing violence into the Kurdish movement, the PKK aims to pull the carpet from under the HDP and its charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtas.

POTENTIAL WINNERS OF THE CONTROLLED CONFLICT

If the fighting remains limited and ends soon, it could strengthen both Erdogan and Ocalan. Erdogan may well emerge as the strongman who "beat the PKK," which would help his AKP if early elections are held in November -- as now seems likely given the collapsed coalition talks with the CHP.

As for Ocalan, he has not spoken out against the fighting thus far. Yet there is no doubt that PKK violence would come to an immediate end if he calls for it to stop in the near term. This would reinstate his grip over the Kurdish movement and show the Turks that only he can deliver peace; he would once again become Erdogan's interlocutor in negotiations.

The risk for Ocalan is that the violence could spiral out of control in the coming months. And even if he is able to end the bloodshed, many Turks may refuse to reaccept him in any role during future peace talks. Similarly, Erdogan's AKP could slide in the polls if the fighting turns into full-scale war, with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) rising in

its place.

Given these risks, Ocalan will likely call for an end to the violence sooner rather than later, most likely before November. This could in turn give the AKP a bump in the polls leading into early elections.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

For now, the United States is going along with Ankara's campaign against the PKK as the price for support against ISIS. Yet Washington was deeply engaged on the margins of the Turkey-PKK reconciliation process and is certainly not happy that it has all been put in danger.

More broadly, while Washington will continue to defend Turkey's right to protect itself against the PKK, it will also draw a line between attacks against the PKK and attacks against the PYD, which remains an active combatant against ISIS in Syria. Washington is pleased that Ankara has come on board against ISIS -- on August 12, U.S. planes took off from Turkey's Incirlik base to bomb ISIS targets. This does not mean, however, that U.S. policymakers will completely drop the PYD in return for Turkish support. Accordingly, Washington will press Turkey to not target the PYD. An unintended consequence of this policy is that it could create fissures between the PKK and PYD -- a development that both Ankara and Washington would welcome.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. ❖

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