

Turks vs. Kurds

Jan 19, 2010



Articles & Testimony

Turkey's Kurdish problem, a long and bitter conflict, has taken a vicious new turn in recent weeks as ordinary Kurds and Turks have started fighting in the streets. That might sound like nothing new, but it is: although Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have fought each other since the 1980s, the conflict never escalated into personal violence between Turkish citizens. Ordinary Turks never vented their anger on Kurdish citizens, nor did Kurds attack their Turkish neighbors. The struggle was ideological and political, not ethnic.

Until now. In the latest incident, a high-school fight in the city of Mersin turned into a neighborhood melee involving more than 200 people. There have also been disturbing episodes of ethnic mobs forming. The trend is alarming: if regular Turks and Kurds (a demographic minority who make up the majority in the southeast) begin killing each other, it could rip the country apart.

Turkey can still pull back from the brink. To understand how, it's necessary to first examine the roots of the violence. It all started with the "Kurdish opening," an overture the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) launched this past fall to address long-simmering tensions with the Kurdish community by offering wide-ranging new rights including bilingual education (Kurds already enjoy cultural rights such as the freedom to run private schools and Kurdish-language media). It also offered to grant Kurds recognition as a separate political community

PKK members were also promised an unofficial amnesty. But the approach backfired. PKK members allowed back into the country held a victory rally in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir on Oct. 19, declaring that they had returned to Turkey not to take advantage of the amnesty but to continue representing the PKK, an illegal organization. These PKK members added that they had no remorse for their past actions and made more demands on the Turkish government.

Such demonstrations, and the image of former PKK terrorists walking free, touched a raw nerve in a country that has suffered more than 30,000 deaths from PKK terror over the years. The result was violence. The government subsequently backed down, calling off its plan to bring more PKK members home. But pro-PKK demonstrations have continued, Turkey's Constitutional Court has shut down the Kurdish nationalist and pro-PKK Democratic Society Party, and ethnic violence still burns.

The AKP is now paying the price for its failed gambit. Since coming to power in 2002, the party has outsmarted all opposition and built solid support. But with the collapse of the Kurdish opening, the party has been dealt its first significant setback. The AKP is already slipping in the polls as a result. In an attempt to win back Turkey's majority, the AKP has played up its nationalist credentials. But this strategy won't work -- the party also needs to keep Kurds, an important constituency, on board.

Yet there remains a way out. Thus far the AKP has dealt with the Kurdish problem by trying to assign the Kurds collective rights in a way that would elevate them above many other non-Turkish Muslim ethnic groups, and has done so without seeking broader consensus, which it could have attempted by initiating a nationwide conversation. This approach has only created resentment throughout Turkish society. To address it, the AKP needs to work much harder at convincing ordinary Turks that their country needs to address the Kurdish problem. The AKP should also launch an initiative to increase the rights and liberties of all Turkish citizens, by enhancing the freedom of expression, for example. Assigning special rights to one group is a mistake.

Such a new strategy would have another advantage: it would win favor with the European Union, which frequently criticizes Ankara for its stance on the Kurds. Early in its tenure, the AKP pushed hard for EU accession, but the party lost interest in the process after encountering opposition from Brussels in 2005. It's high time that the party returned to the liberal pro-EU and democratic promises of its early days -- not just for the party's own sake, but to save Turkey from more violence.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. ❖

Newsweek

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

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

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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