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*TURKEY:  
IN THE CAMP OF COUNTER-REVOLUTION*

Danger lurks in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> On November 28, gunmen brazenly shot and killed Tahir Elçi, prominent human rights advocate and president of the Diyarbakir Bar Association. Elçi had bravely spoken out against the atrocities in Turkey, including against the Kurds – his own community. Perhaps the most dangerous statement he made was when he said that the banned Kurdistan People's Party (PKK) is "not a terrorist organisation." With that, Elçi brought the wrath of the fascistic nationalists on his head. A bullet followed.

Elçi's is not the first political murder in Turkey. His death comes in the context of harsh repression in the majority Kurdish region of eastern Turkey. Major cities in that part of the country – Cizre, Nusaybin and Sur – are under curfew. The Turkish state has reopened its war against the PKK and its fraternal Syrian group, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Rather than tackle the growth of ISIS on its borders, Turkey has decided to attack the only proven force capable of beating back ISIS. The death of Elçi is part of the new and vicious assault on the Kurds inside Turkey. Gone is the peace process inaugurated a few years ago. Turkey is on the precipice of a major civil war.

Two days before Elçi's murder, on November 26, the ruling government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) arrested two prominent Turkish journalists, *Cumhuriyet's* editor Can Dündar and its Ankara bureau chief Erdem Gül. What was the reason for their arrest? Dündar and Gül had exposed the Turkish government's logistical assistance to Syrian rebels in January 2014. The paper had video and photographs of trucks that belonged to Turkish intelligence (MIT) ready to ferry arms and ammunition into Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said then that "the individual who has reported this will pay a high price." The price to be paid has now been extracted. Despite worldwide condemnation of the arrests of Dündar and Gül, the Turkish state remains obdurate. In 2015, Reporters Without Borders awarded its Press Freedom Prize to *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi* – Dündar's paper. There is no irony in his arrest.

On November 24, Turkish aircraft shot down a Russian jet that had been bombing extremist forces along the Turkish-Syrian border. Among those who had been bombed was the Sultan Abdülhamit Brigade – a group of

Turkmen *ihadis*, who have been one of the proxy armies of Turkey inside Syria. It is because of the presence of these proxy armies that Turkey supports that the pro-AKP media has begun to talk of them as “moderate jihadis” (*ilimli cihatcilar*). The Brigade closely collaborates with the Jaish al-Fatah (the Army of Conquest) and the al-Qaeda proxy, Jabhat al-Nusra. Turkey has been playing with fire. It knew early in 2011 that the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would require Western bombardment, but it also knew – as a former Turkish military official told me – that such a Western intervention at the necessary scale would not be forthcoming. In the absence of such an intervention, Turkey has fired up its proxies to create a situation where the West will feel obliged to intervene. Turkey’s stature as a NATO power allows it (under Article V) to call for Western help if it is attacked. Perhaps the reckless shooting down of the Russian jet was intended to draw the West more forcefully into this conflict. Thus far, it does not seem to have worked.

Meanwhile, the entry of Russian and Iranian forces into Syria near the Turkish border has complicated matters for Turkey. The leader of the Syrian Kurdish political party – the PYD – Salih Muslim said that this troop build up will now make it impossible for Turkey to intervene in Syria. Erdogan’s “zero problems with neighbours” policy has been upended. So has the image of Turkey as a democratic state. Images of the crackdown on the Gezi Park protestors and on the Soma miners are vivid. They have corroded the reputation of Erdogan. The AKP is firmly in power, cemented by its victory in the November 1 election, but its authority is dented. No longer does it carry the name of “moderate Islamism”; a more accurate sense of its politics is “authoritarian populism.”

## ORIGINS OF THE AKP

The AKP emerged on the Turkish political scene in 2001. It picked up the mantle of narrower Islamist political parties such as Refah (Welfare), Dogru Yol Partisi (True Path) and Fazilet (Virtue). These parties drew support from about a fifth of the population at most – people who believed that religious piety and practice must be allowed to have a place in Turkish political life. For them the epitome of politics was to pray in public. Turkey’s long-time ruling party – the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party or the CHP) – and the military had disallowed any public religious symbolism. The State’s militant secularism led the Constitutional Court to shut down Refah and Fazilet because they were accused of trying to “redefine the secular nature of the republic.” The AKP grew out of the ashes of Fazilet, but it pushed aside the more extravagant religious aspects of their traditions (that would be harnessed by the Saadet or Felicity Party, which has a marginal presence in Turkish politics). Rather, the AKP accepted the legacy of its religious heritage (signaled by the word Justice in its name) but pushed for

“Development” as its main theme. The leaders of the AKP, Erdogan and Abdullah Gül, dressed like mid-level Anatolian businessmen, with nondescript suits and ties as their uniform. Erdogan (as Mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998) joined his party leaders in winning local government seats, where they proved their ability to govern. It was where the AKP established its reputation as a “moderate Islamist” force.

In 2002, the AKP won the parliamentary election with a parliamentary majority – thirty four percent of the vote translated, because of Turkish electoral rules, to sixty percent of the seats in the parliament. Erdogan became the Prime Minister. That he had been in jail briefly in 1998 for “inciting hatred based on religious difference” did not seem to matter. He had what counted as a popular mandate. The AKP and Erdogan rightly feared a military coup to oust them. Their political vision was outside that of the consensus between the CHP and the military. In many ways, Erdogan’s push for Turkey to join the European Union was a way to insulate his party from military action – the EU’s rules forbid military governments. Early indications of liberalism from Erdogan came not because of benevolence or of “moderate Islamism,” but because of fears of the military. The AKP had to tread carefully.

### AKP IN POWER

As well, Erdogan inherited a Turkish economy spluttering along on fumes. Policies to protect the old Istanbul elite’s chokehold on the economy had run their course. The debt crisis that hit the Global South in the 1980s had an impact on Turkey as well. The business sector needed foreign investment and it – with slack domestic demand – needed access to foreign markets. The classic IMF goal to draw in Foreign Direct Investment and to design the industrial sector toward export-oriented growth dominated. In Anatolia, the vast landmass of Turkey in Asia, small industrial units and business houses bristled with the desire to break the dominance of Istanbul’s large tycoons and enter both Europe and the Arab world to sell their goods. These Anatolian businessmen formed the backbone of the AKP’s support base. They watched as Turkey’s economy shrunk by six per cent between 1994 and 1999, then by nine per cent in 2001.<sup>2</sup> High debt rates and unimaginative policy slates swept coalition government upon government out of power, as their leaders – Akbulut, Yilmaz, Demirel, Çiller, Yilmaz, Erbakan, Yilmaz, and Ecevit – took the oath and then crumbled. Anatolia’s businessmen did not like the instability. They threw in their chips with the AKP, which swept to power. The AKP’s business supporters’ commitment to Europe was equal parts desire for access to the Custom’s Union and for curtailment of the monopoly power of the old guard.<sup>3</sup>

A soft touch by the AKP towards its own programmatic commitment to Islamism did not stop its supporters from their own enthusiasm. In 1994,

when Erdogan won the race to become mayor of Istanbul, his supporters cheered, "The Other Turkey Has Come to Power." What they meant was clear. Those who wanted to display their personal piety had long felt like second-class citizens in Turkey. It was his gesture toward the piety of the poor and the lower middle-class that drew support for the AKP. Erdogan condensed the entire spectrum of beliefs from piety to business in his defense of the family. He argued that the family is the main subject of the nation, and said – in 2013 – "Nation and state exist only if family exists." Politics, he noted, must be "a servant of family." Development would only follow if the family was strong. What does Erdogan mean by family? He means that traditional values – with the wife being subordinate to the husband – must be upheld, that women must have at least three children and that the spiritual idea of the Family must be reiterated in social life so that Western-style individualism does not get free rein.<sup>4</sup> Social welfare politics of the government and Islamic charity work focused attention on the family as the atom of the new Turkey. Politics returned to reproductive issues (such as abortion rights) and to ideas of gender relations. Such a suffocating agenda appealed to sections of the lower middle class that saw their futures blocked by the Westernized elite of Istanbul. The AKP camouflaged its neo-liberal policy direction by turning rhetorical attention to the behavior of the Turkish people.

Ideas of "Islamic reformism" and "Muslim democracy" allowed the AKP to showcase its commitment to neo-liberal capitalism and to the politics of piety, with the latter couched firmly in the domain of the family. What was the character of this "Islamic reformism"? It was precisely that Turkey was a Muslim democracy, which was not in the camp of monarchy or dictatorship – the other examples in the Middle East. The bar was low for Erdogan's purposes. What made the AKP even more "moderate" in the early 2000s was that it welcomed an IMF plan to cut public expenditure and privatize public institutions and lands. The AKP's fealty to IMF style neoliberal policy classified it on the global stage as moderate or reformist. That it was elected by the ballot box and was a Muslim-oriented party gave it the patina of "Islamic reformism."

Being a member of NATO meant that Turkey had close links to the West. This went back to the post-World War 2 era, when Turkey threw itself into the West's camp and became a forward post against the Soviet Union. Turkey's army was allowed considerable latitude with its coups (1960, 1971, 1980) as long as it allowed its soil to base NATO surveillance and military aircraft and PGM-19 Jupiter missiles. By the 1990s, the West had begun to slough off its association with military governments. These had become a post-Cold War embarrassment. A muted coup in 1997 (also known as the post-modern coup) saw the military use a memorandum rather than tanks to oust the Refah party's Erbakan from his short tenure as head of a coalition government. Erdogan was right to be anxious in 2002, worried that the

military would move against the AKP government.<sup>5</sup> But the AKP's eagerness to join the European Union and its willingness to work with NATO neutralized any threat from the military. This kind of "moderate Islamism" had no problem with NATO and its wars.

The test for the AKP came in 2003, when the US was ready to attack Iraq. Almost all of Turkey's citizens opposed the war. In February 2003, the AKP deputies voted to allow the US military to modernize their bases in Turkey. The next month, the parliament was to vote on allowing the US to use these bases in its war on Iraq. The AKP leadership told their deputies to vote for the use of these bases, despite popular opinion. Nearly half the AKP deputies broke with their leadership to join the opposition and voted to prevent the use of Turkish soil for America's war. Erdogan held a third vote, where he whipped his deputies into shape and delivered a mandate for the US to use the bases. It turned out that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership did not want the US to use Turkey as a launch-pad, invalidating the need for the bases.<sup>6</sup> What Erdogan showed NATO, however, was that he could deliver his land for Western interests against the will of his population. That vote did not dent Erdogan's popularity within Turkey. Mosques, which would have erupted in anti-Western chatter, remained silent. A few minor protests by the left and the by now mute Saadet Party made no impact. Erdogan had taken Turkey's Islamist tradition and delivered it to NATO. This is the true definition of "moderate Islamism." What was allowed – as a safety valve – were public protests in 2006 against the Danish cartoon controversy and demonstrations in 2009 against the Israeli bombing of Gaza. These became the authorized forms of protest for the Islamists. Criticism of Erdogan was forbidden.

Erdogan's close associate, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu defined his foreign policy terrain as "zero problems with neighbours."<sup>7</sup> Despite the AKP's association with NATO and desire for entry into the European markets, there was a clear understanding that the opportunities posed in West Asia and North Africa should not be underestimated. With the downturn in the Western economies by 2007, this strategy of looking south paid off handsome dividends. In 2010, the Turks signed a four-country free trade zone agreement – the Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association – which included Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Massive Turkish finance went into the real estate boom in Syria, which had opened its economy to neo-liberal policies under Bashar al-Assad's government. Turkish exports drove across the border to inundate the markets of these three countries.<sup>8</sup> Economic ties with Israel also flourished, with Turkish goods entering Israel at exponential speed.

Turkey's GDP expanded from \$230 billion in 2002 to \$788 billion in 2014. The fruits of its economic policy paid off dividends for the Istanbul based oligopoly and the Anatolian businessmen alike. Confidence in the AKP rose.

It had “solved” the economic crisis for the wealthy and it had silenced the military in the barracks. Restive forces amongst the informal sector and the working-class had to be contained. By 2005, the AKP opened up a full-scale attack on workers rights and threatened constitutional changes to put more draconian power in the hands of Erdogan. The full force of the state went after those who would question Erdogan’s authority – tax inspections of dissidents, legal shenanigans to silence critics.<sup>9</sup> The AKP would lash out at its various opponents – the tentacular Islamist movement of Fethullah Gülen, the establishment in the military, the trade unions, and of course the various national minorities (the Alevis, the Armenians, the Kurds). From the shadows emerged the fascistic Grey Wolves to do the dirty work – assassinating this leader of that community and threatening violence when it best suited them. The AKP – in their suits – would sit back and watch the thugs of the Grey Wolves and their own shock troops take their views to their logical conclusion. The AKP bared its teeth through the Grey Wolves, who would return periodically to draw blood.

In 2010, the AKP won a referendum that would allow the rewriting of the Turkish constitution. What the AKP wanted was to create a presidential system of governance with Erdogan at its head. One of the main ambitions of the AKP is to abolish the parliament, which is – to its eyes – fractious, and turn the Turkish state over to presidential rule. The AKP’s demographic advantage in Anatolia allows it to imagine that its candidate – whether Erdogan or not – would win presidential elections for many decades to come. It would cement power in the hands of the AKP for as long as it would take to legislate Turkey into its image. To recast the 1980 Constitution, the AKP had to win a two-thirds majority in the parliament. By 2010, the republican opposition had been tethered. It found no avenues to grow. The Left was marginal, and the Kurdish political parties threatened with violence. Neither alone would be able to break the ten per cent vote barrier and enter parliament with a sufficient bloc to stymie Erdogan. Nothing seemed in the way of the AKP and Erdogan. When the Arab Spring broke out, the arrogance of the AKP spilled over its borders before it had consolidated its power internally.

## TURKEY’S AUTUMN

The Arab Spring of 2011 turned Davutoglu’s calculations of “zero problems with neighbours” upside down. The AKP has a temperamental connection with the Muslim Brotherhood around the Mediterranean. When the uprisings took place, it – along with Qatar – reached out to its contacts from Tunisia’s Ennahda to Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood. But this association with the Muslim Brotherhood brought the AKP’s government out of line from the West’s reaction to the uprisings. When the West was wary, the AKP was jubilant. The fall of Mubarak in Egypt brought Erdogan to Cairo, where – at a major

public address – he put the AKP forward as the model for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The West, particularly the United States, and the Saudis were not comfortable with the outcome. They had other irons in the fire. But this gap between Turkey and the West would not last long. Turkey backed the Saudi invasion of Bahrain to smash the peaceful protestors, and soon Turkey would be alongside Saudi Arabia in its support for proxy armies in Syria and to demolish the Libyan state. Gaps would open up when the Saudi's went all out to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya. The Turks did not do anything to counter them. The association with the West was too powerful for the AKP to break with NATO and the Saudis on their emergent narrative of the Arab Spring. Syria was the touchstone.

All the contradictions that had been muted by the AKP since 2002 unraveled as the Syrian war continued. Erdogan had expected that the Assad regime would fall quickly and that his preferred Brotherhood leaders would ride into Damascus, turning Syria into an extension of Turkish authority. He also hoped that his Syrian Turkmen proxies on the border would allow older nationalist claims on that territory to the fore – Turkey has long wanted to claim parts of northern Syria as its own. Erdogan openly gestured towards an end to any Kurdish aspirations on the borderlands. But Assad's rule did not end, and Turkey's maximum position against him made a climb down almost impossible. There was no room for a rapprochement. Turkey had opened its doors to the Syrian opposition to set up their offices in Istanbul, and it had allowed Syrian rebels of all stripes to set up bases on the Turkish side of the border. By June 2011, the Free Syrian Army formed its main base in the southern Turkish province of Hatay. In 2011, the Turks had been enthusiastic about the NATO attack on Libya (despite the fact that Erdogan had been a close associate of Muammar Qaddafi, having received the 2010 al-Qaddafi Human Rights Prize in Tripoli). There was an expectation that NATO would now shift its aircraft to bomb Damascus and to remove Assad speedily. The Free Syrian Army – egged on by Turkey – called for a No Fly Zone over Syria. This did not happen, largely because the Russian and Chinese would not permit any kind of United Nations resolution to effect regime change in Damascus. Erdogan and Davutoglu saw their plans come unstuck. Syria became a quagmire for their ambitions – even as the Turkish army did not directly involve itself in the war.

The civil war in Syria forced the Syrian National Army to move away from its northern border and consolidate the main population centers to the west of the country. Assad delivered to the Syrian Kurds their long demanded autonomy. Turkey's experienced Turkish political party – the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) came across the Iraqi and Turkish border to assist their Syrian compatriots in their allied party – the PYD – to form an army, the YPG. This army fought off other rebels (and later ISIS) to create Rojava, a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. The presence of a Kurdish enclave was seen – north of the border – as a major political victory for the Kurds. Iraqi

Kurds had their own autonomous region, and now so did Syrian Kurds. Turkey's Kurds, meanwhile, remained in the midst of a ceasefire with the Turkish state and was in a peace process that seemed close to being completed. The PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan was in Imrali Prison, where he had been in the midst of the Imrali Process with Erdogan's government. All this would collapse as the Syrian war continued, as the YPG and PKK established themselves on the border and as Erdogan's obstinacy over Syria began to suck Turkey into its morass.

The Syrian war opened the door to the rise of sectarianism in the region. Saudi Arabia's proxy Jaish al-Islam, al-Qaeda's proxy Jabhat al-Nusra as well as Turkey's proxies such as the Sultan Abdülhamit Brigade reframed the Syrian conflict from a civil dispute into a sectarian one. It was now to be a war between the Sunni and the Shia. The Turkish Islamist press took this opportunity to drill into the long dormant traditions of sectarianism and Sunni communalism.<sup>10</sup> The Grey Wolves took to the streets – drawing chalk marks on the doors of the Turkish Alevis. Animosity over Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria rankled the conservatives amongst the Islamists, the fascist-nationalists and the republican nationalists. None wanted to see their long hated enemy gain political power. Turkey would do everything to sideline Kurdish autonomy and to destroy the Assad government, even if it meant giving leeway to the most hardline Islamist radicals.

In 2014, a senior Kurdish commander of the YPG told me, with a smile, that Turkey was to Syria as Pakistan was to Afghanistan. What he meant was that, like Pakistan, Turkey had allowed itself to become a base for foreign *jihadis* eager to go across the border and destabilise its neighbour. Airports along the rib of Anatolia – particularly at Mardin – welcomed *jihadis* from Libya and Europe, who then went along to shore up first the assortment of groups in the western parts of Syria, but then – after 2012 – to the more audacious ISIS. In 2014, Press TV's Serena Shim reported that ISIS fighters and supplies seemed to have no problem crossing the border. Her team took footage of trucks with World Food Organization logos carrying fighters into Syria (Shim died when a cement truck hit her car en route to Suruç a day after she filed her story). Syrian Kurdish journalist Barzan Iso reported that Qatari charities had sent aid and assistance to Carablus, under ISIS control. Dündar's *Cumhuriyet* published photographs of trucks believed to be from Turkish intelligence carrying arms into Syria. Wounded ISIS fighters crossed into Turkey at the border town of Akçakale and went to Urfa's Balıkgöl State Hospital for treatment—in plain sight. The Turkish government became belligerent towards journalists who tried to cover stories of ISIS recruiters inside Turkey. Erdogan called reports of recruitment centres "shameless, sordid and vile." He went after *New York Times*' Ceylan Yeginsu. Turkey's border became the main lifeline for various kinds of *jihadis*.

When the Kurdish town of Kobané came under ISIS siege within hundreds of meters from Turkey, the Turkish authorities prevented Kurdish fighters from crossing the border to reinforce the town. Instead, the Turkish military sat back, garrisoned the border and allowed ISIS to seize the town. While this was going on, in October 2014 Turkish aircraft bombed Kurdish positions on the Iraq-Syria border. With great reluctance and under immense pressure, the Turkish government finally allowed Kurdish forces in Kobane to be resupplied by the Iraqi Kurdish government. Kobané was retaken in January 2015 but only after it had been destroyed. Turkey's involvement with ISIS is a mystery. It has certainly not closed its border to them. When it allowed US aircraft to use Turkish bases to bomb ISIS targets, the price it extracted from the US was the allowance to bomb PKK bases in Iraq and to open up a small war against the Kurds once more.

### THE TURKISH LEFT

Why has the Turkish government gone after the Kurds again and not after ISIS? The question resolves around the AKP's collapsing domestic agenda as much as its geopolitical expectations. In the parliamentary elections of June 2015, the AKP was unable to win the decisive victory Erdogan needed to revise the Constitution. His path was blocked by the People's Democratic Party, the HDP, which won more than ten percent of the popular vote and so therefore earned seats in parliament. The HDP is not strictly speaking a Kurdish party, although that is how it is often described in the media. It was formed in 2012 when a group of Left leaning political organisations – all with firm pro-Kurdish views – declared to form an electoral coalition. The similarity with Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos would not be unkind. The HDP holds fairly conventional Leftist positions – against nuclear power, for LGBT rights, against discrimination of minorities, for women's equality, against neoliberalism, for worker's power.

The HDP nonetheless has a strong current that is close to the PKK and that reveres its jailed leader, Öcalan (known as Apo). At rallies leading up to the parliamentary election, the PKK flags and pictures of Öcalan did not appear. The HDP was careful to distance itself from those connections. Nonetheless, people from the crowd would cry out, "Biji Serok Apo" (Long Live Apo!). The HDP held together currents that are pro-ceasefire and pro-PKK, although the former clearly dominate the leadership. It says a great deal that the two leaders of the HDP are Selahattin Demirtaş, who comes from the Kurdish heartland and its main political parties (Democratic Society Party and Peace and Democracy Party), and Figen Yüksekdağ, who comes from a Marxist-Leninist tradition in the Socialist Party of the Oppressed. The unity of these two strands – Kurdish and Leftist – is not new. In the 1990s, the People's Labour Party (HEP) and the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP) – one Kurdish, the other leftist – fought the general election of 1991

together. An alphabet soup of parties followed along these lines as the Turkish state banned them and arrested their leaders. The objective conditions for a Left-Kurdish united political force existed at least since the 1980s.

Turkey's Left has struggled to chart a path out of Young Turk nationalism (Kemalism). Plagued by sectarian splits and violence, the Left went into disarray. On May Day 1977, two hundred thousand people gathered at Taksim Square in Istanbul. Violence took the lives of thirty-nine people and scattered the Left into its fragments. Classical neo-liberal policies that followed disarmed the working-class, as an informal sector grew outside the trade union movement. Rural to urban migration expanded the population in the cities, and contributed to the pool of the informal sector. The reservoirs of the Turkish left had been emptied. New opportunities had to be seized, but the Left was not prepared for the challenge. When thousands of people descended to protect Gezi Park in Istanbul from the neo-liberal bulldozer in 2013, the Left found itself made vital again. It is the Gezi dynamic that poked a hole in the AKP's narrative of being the sole representative of the Turkish people, and drew disenfranchised and alienated Turks (including the Kurds) to pin their hopes on an alternative.

Amongst those who migrated to the cities over the past several decades were a large number of Kurds. Half of the Kurdish population now lives in the western part of Turkey, away from their older Kurdish homeland in the east. Over a million Kurds live in Istanbul, making it the largest Kurdish city in the country. It had been clear for decades, therefore, that in Turkey the Kurdish Question could not be solved as it had in Iraq and then in Syria. In Iraq, the Kurds live – by and large – in the country's north. They have a contiguous homeland that became – after 1991 – their autonomous region. In Syria, the Kurds have pockets of concentration on the northern border with Turkey. It is these areas that became Rojava during the civil war. Nothing like this is possible in Turkey. The Kurdish parties had to pivot from calls for secession of a Kurdish homeland to the transformation of Turkey into a country of multiple nationalities. This is why the PKK ended its call for an independent homeland in 1993 and sued for peace. This is precisely why the Kurdish parties, since the 1990s, have sought a wide alliance with the Left.

## TWO ELECTIONS OF 2015

The HDP's ability to secure ten per cent in the June parliamentary elections stymied the AKP. Erdogan wanted to break the HDP so as to secure a complete mandate in the second election of November – after his party was not able to form a government in June. To clear the way for the AKP, Erdogan had to do two things: he had to break the HDP and to take votes away from the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Both birds would

be killed with one stone, namely by a frontal attack on the Kurdish and other minority populations.

Rather than accept the HDP victory as a sign of life in Turkish democracy, the AKP opened a direct attack on this legitimate political force. Syrian Kurdish gains against ISIS combined with the HDP's thirteen per cent in the Turkish election rankled the anti-Kurdish forces that slumber within Turkey. They went ballistic on September 8, burning down HDP offices and attacking Kurdish shops and homes. A few hours before the attack on the HDP headquarters, the Turkish air force and Special Forces units struck PKK bases in Avashin, Bazyan, Qandil and Zap – in Iraq. The virulent attack took place after PKK units ambushed a Turkish military convoy in Dalica, killing fifteen soldiers. The death of these soldiers provided Erdogan with the opportunity he needed. The Turkish troops opened a full-scale assault on the PKK positions. Retaliations come on both sides, leading Turkey towards the worst period of the conflict that ran from 1984 to 2012 (with a lull between 1999 and 2004). It is difficult to imagine how Turkey or the PKK can walk away from the intensification of this war or to return to the negotiation table.

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections of November 1, a bomb blast in Ankara at an HDP rally killed over a hundred (mostly young) activists. Shock waves went through the HDP support base. Was this a message from the AKP, whose government had neglected to provide the most basic security for the rally? It was feared that liberals who had voted for the HDP would now rethink their votes and cast their ballot for stability. This violence took a toll on the electorate. It allowed the AKP to put itself forward as the party of Order. Sections of traditionalist Kurds, who had already been uneasy with the HDP's radical political platform (socialism, gay rights, women's rights), went for the AKP this election cycle. Between intimidation and a call for traditionalism, the AKP was able to make inroads into the Kurdish heartland. Unfortunately, it was a difficult and troubled period of election campaigning. Lives were lost," said Selahattin Demirtas, the leader of the HDP.

The alliance between Kurdish nationalists and the Left has moved the Kurdish parties to step away from the separatist ambitions of Kurdish nationalism. The new language was for human rights and dignity within Turkey, not departure from Turkey. A section of (mainly younger) Kurds who have seen their livelihood collapse and an increase in the security pressure from the army and Turkish intelligence are not prepared to accept the Turkish bargain. The violence visited upon Turkey's south-east by the Erdogan government put a great deal of stress on these communities, whose youth broke their allegiance for the HDP and voted for the marginal – but firmly Kurdish separatist – Rights and Freedoms Party (Hakpar). Amongst the Left there is also a lack of unity, with the Patriotic Party (Vatan), the People's Liberation Party (HKP) and the Communist Party (KP, founded n

2014) standing outside the HDP. Each of these parties took votes away from the HDP.

Winks and nods toward Turkish supremacy over the minorities – including public statements by Erdogan denying the Armenian genocide and denying the existence of the Kurdish problem. This hard turn drew voters of the fascistic MHP to the AKP. Why would they vote for the MHP when the AKP – much more likely to win – had adopted much of the vision of the MHP? The MHP support collapsed. In November, they lost half the seats they won in the June elections to the AKP. The MHP voters went to the AKP, as did disaffected traditionalist Kurds. Erdogan's gambit succeeded – although the HDP did succeed in getting over ten percent and securing seats in parliament.

What can the HDP do to prevent Turkey's spiral into civil conflict? The violence against the Kurdish majority areas has depressed the ability of the HDP to provide any kind of moderation to the AKP regime. An assassination attempt against HDP leader Demirtas came just before the murder of Tahir Elçi. At Elçi's funeral, Demirtas said coldly, "What killed Tahir was not the state, but statelessness." This is a small indication that the idea of Kurdish nationalism remains intact. Pushed to the wall, even Demirtas, author of the Kurdish-Left alliance, might seek shelter in Kurdish nationalism. But the HDP has greater tasks ahead. It is the only force that would be able to guide the country toward peace negotiations and insist upon a more reasonable position vis-à-vis Syria. The AKP is in a bind – caught between its commitments to NATO and its own Islamist ambitions for West Asia. It is not capable of breaking out of this contradiction. Turkey will have to suffer that blockage. No alternative force is as yet capable of defeating the AKP. Only the HDP can prevent it from total power, but it cannot come close to taking power itself. Erdogan might be able to change the Constitution. But what will he inherit? A country with much fewer democratic rights, with an opposition that has been weakened to anger, and an insurgency that claimed forty thousand lives and might yet claim many thousand more. Hardly the empire of Mehmed II, Erdogan's hero.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gratitude for my *BirGün* colleagues — Ömür Sahin Keyif, Can Ugur and Ibrahim Varli and my editor at *Mesele* — Can Semercioglu as well as my publishers Yordam Kitap for drawing me into the Turkish orbit.
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- <sup>7</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> See the essays in *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013 and Tarık Ouzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy," *Turkish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Ayşe Bugra and Osman Savaskan, Osman Savaskan, *New Capitalism in Turkey: the Relationship between Politics, Religion and Business*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014; *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony*, eds. İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen and Baris Alp Özden, London: Pluto, 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Cihan Tugal, "Democratic Janissaries? Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring," *New Left Review*, 76, July-August 2012, p. 19.