

The renewed Turkey-PKK conflict has shattered the illusion that Kurds can participate legitimately in Turkey's political system

*Clashes have taken place between Turkish authorities and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with the violence escalating ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for 1 November. **Egemen Bezci** and **Nicholas Borroz** write that the renewed hostilities, following a period of relative peace between the two sides, has undermined the notion that Kurds can legitimately participate in Turkey's political system. They argue that with both sides becoming polarised, the conflict could ultimately lead to the fragmentation of the Turkish state.*



The renewed clashes between Turkish authorities and the **Kurdistan Workers' Party** (PKK) that have taken place in recent months are reminiscent of the 1990s, when a full-scale insurgency was waged by the PKK. During the last ten years, decreasing levels of violence had made peace seem close at hand, but this is no longer the case. Incidents of violence are now covered on a daily basis in the Turkish press, and some commentators have already drawn comparisons with the previous era of conflict.



In fact, this time around, the war between the PKK and Ankara will be very different. It will likely be more intractable, less military in nature, and may eventually lead to Turkey's fragmentation. In terms of the new conflict's long-lasting nature, its seeming insolvability is now more confounding than ever. Kurds thought in the last decade that there was a chance to participate in Turkey's political system as a legitimate way to advance their interests. The recent breakdown of the PKK ceasefire shatters that illusion.

Although the reasons behind Ankara's decision to resume hostilities are contested, it is widely acknowledged that one of the causes was Kurds' increasing independence within the political system. Over the course of the last decade, Kurds were granted increasing political and societal freedom by Prime Minister-turned-President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and in return he received their electoral support.

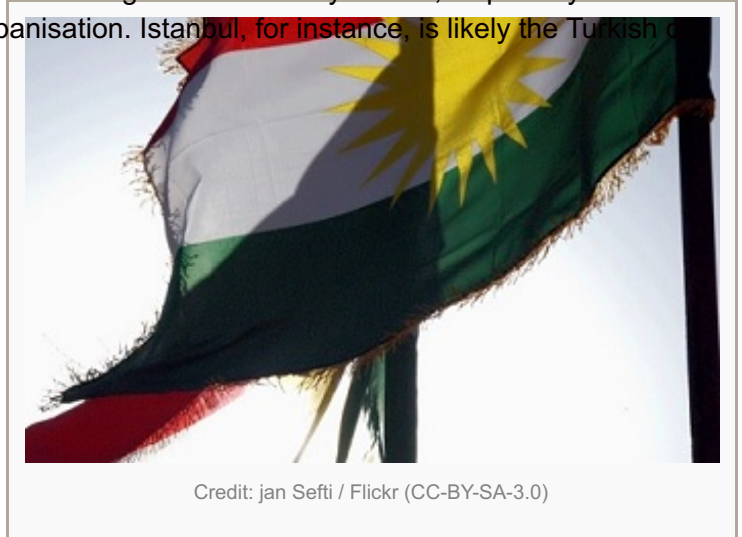
This platform of Kurdish support was one of the factors that enabled Erdoğan to consolidate the power of his **Justice and Development Party** (AKP). Since 2003 until the recent June elections, the AKP had held an absolute majority in parliament that allowed it significant capacity to exert its political agenda. In the June election, however, the Kurds' new political party, the **Peoples' Democratic Party** (HDP) garnered nearly six million votes, depriving the AKP of its ability to rule with an absolute majority. For this reason, many commentators argue that the Turkish government launched an attack on the PKK, which is widely regarded to be linked to the HDP.

Many Kurds will now be reticent to participate in a political system that they perceive will never allow them to advance their interests. Whereas before, during the 1990s, Kurdish political representation was unimaginable, Kurds have now had their hopes of attaining meaningful political representation raised and then dashed. This latest experiment in allowing Kurds access to political power has failed. Many will likely seek to express their will through organisations deemed illegitimate by the state, such as the PKK.

Another striking difference compared to the 1990s is that the PKK is now employing different strategies. The PKK was previously based out of Turkey's southeastern region, which is mountainous and sparsely populated. Although Turkish military forces were able to establish tenuous daytime control of much of this region, at night, the PKK reigned and soldiers were forced back to their barracks.

Now, the PKK is able to launch attacks from within cities and throughout the country. In fact, its primary base is in urban areas, primarily due to Turkey's overall trend of urbanisation. Istanbul, for instance, is likely the Turkish city with the largest Kurdish population. A recent PKK attack on a police station in Istanbul, carried out during the light of day, indicates the PKK's increased ability to carry out urban strikes.

This poses a greater threat to Turkish authorities than in the 1990s, when Turks in Istanbul rarely witnessed, and sometimes even knew very little about, the conflict between their government and the PKK. From a purely logistical perspective, it will be harder for the Turkish government to combat the PKK if it is able to blend into urban populations. The government will likely continue to impose curfews, particularly in Kurdish towns, but this strategy will only augment Kurds' sense of marginalisation.



Both the PKK and the Turkish authorities are also now focused on foreign conflicts, which will distract them from launching large-scale attacks against each other inside of Turkey. Turkey is focused on preventing the expansion of Kurdish zones of control in Syria, as well as combatting Islamic State, which poses a serious terrorist threat to Turkey. The PKK, in turn, is devoting resources to helping Kurds in Syria and Iraq defend themselves against Islamic State.

In the 1990s, the PKK briefly tried to expel Turkish forces from southeastern towns, such as Semdinli and Cizre, by using hundreds of fighters to create "liberated areas". This time around, no such sieges will take place. Violence will continue, to be sure, but it will comprise small-scale attacks that number dozens, not hundreds, of PKK fighters. Shows of force will largely be symbolic, as evidenced by recent reports of PKK fighters boarding and searching vehicles in rural areas, setting up local "courts", and establishing security patrols.

As is often the case in guerrilla war, this fight will be about gaining popular support. Thus, the main strategy of the PKK will be to foment divisions between the local population and the government, thereby accelerating the alienation of the Kurdish population from the rest of the country. The HDP's elections results, which are a proxy indicator of popular support for the PKK, show that the group has followers throughout the country.

Ultimately, the factors described above may lead to an eventual fragmentation of the Turkish state, although this fate is by no means certain. The HDP will likely continue its attempts to participate in legitimate political channels, although its efforts will be severely hampered by societal divisions. Already, nationalist mobs have carried out attacks against HDP offices throughout Turkey. The HDP's connections to the PKK mean that party leaders will no doubt soon begin facing legal difficulties for their ties to a "terrorist" group that is actively fighting the state.

Throughout all of this, the HDP may try to continue calling for an expansion of Kurdish rights. Buoyed by its recent electoral success, it may potentially even call for increased regional autonomy in Turkey's southeast. The Turkish public, however, will have no appetite for such requests, which will feed into nationalist fears of Kurds' secessionist ambitions.

As nationalist rejection of Kurdish ambitions become stronger, and as the PKK weakens the state's authority in areas under its control, there may come a point when the Turkish house is broken, and the two sides cannot find an agreeable situation for cohabitation. It is in this way that the resumption of violence could ultimately lead to territorial fragmentation, albeit such an outcome would admittedly be decades away.

To avoid this fate, or at the very least to avoid years of lawlessness that seem set to ensue, both sides need to make serious efforts at reconciliation. But such a suggestion seems doomed to fall on deaf ears, given the circumstances.

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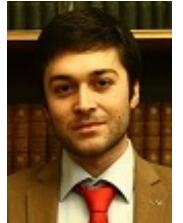
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About the authors

Egemen Bezci – *University of Nottingham*

Egemen Bezci is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Nottingham, focusing on secret intelligence cooperation between Turkey and the West.



Nicholas Borroz

Nicholas Borroz is a Washington, D.C. based analyst of energy geopolitics and investment strategies, specialising in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.



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