

# DISSECTING TURKEY'S "HIDDEN WAR": A DISCUSSION OF TURKEY'S CONFLICT WITH ITS KURDISH MINORITY AND THE SECURITISATION MEASURES SURROUNDING VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND SOUTHERN TURKEY

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Turkey is in the midst of a little-publicised conflict with its ethnic Kurdish population in the southeast of the country. The Kurds in the east have long been repressed by the Turkish government, as they do not share an identity with the Turkish majority peoples, and as such have waged several conflicts against the Turkish government for many decades. The Turkish government has long fought both a military and propaganda war against the Kurds, with the major condemnation of the Kurds coming from the official labelling of the major Kurdish militant faction as a "terrorist" organisation. As a result, and due to Turkey's role as a major strategic partner within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and a strong partner of the European Union, Ankara's allies also consider some Kurdish militant factions as terrorists, posing a major barrier to reconcile the conflicting forces. Often, the Turkish military, which has tremendous capability and recruitment capacity, have launched large-scale battles against Kurdish forces, who are often under-equipped and wage guerrilla warfare against a highly-skilled and organised force.

In light of the current conflict, which began in mid-2015, the Turkish government securitised the conflict as a matter of concern – but only in a domestic setting. The Turkish government urged its allies (namely, NATO and the EU countries) not to interfere in the conflict – whether it be politically or economically, Ankara has assured that it is handling the conflict. This poses problems for Ankara's allies, as the Kurds in the Middle East have proven effective non-state allies in the current conflict against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (henceforth known as Daesh).

This paper poses the question: why has the Turkish government domestically securitised the current Kurdish conflict, while asking its allies not to interfere, thus desecuritising the issue internationally? In answering this question, several steps will be taken to ensure an accurate a portrayal of the conflict can be given. First, a brief overview of the Kurdish conflict will give the reader an historical basis for the context. Second, the current conflict's history will be described concisely due to the complexity and the recent nature of the matter. From this point forward, academic sources cease to be an effective research tool. The conflict is indeed very recent, and relatively little has been published on the subject. As such, primary sources and investigative journalism will be used for a large portion of this essay. Further will this essay discuss the factors leading to the Turkish government's decision to securitise the conflict domestically, and the factors leading it to request its allies not interfere. In conjunction with this, the essay will discuss why Ankara's allies have indeed not commented on the issue, and what factors may contribute to their need to keep Turkey as a strong and placated ally. This essay hypothesises that the Turkish government has securitised the Kurdish conflict domestically by claiming the Kurdish Worker's Party militant group (PKK) are terrorists and threaten Turkish territory, national unity, and domestic security interests; simultaneously, the Turkish government has desecuritisised the conflict abroad by requesting its allies respect the autonomy of Turkey to monopolise violence on its territory and prioritise other regional issues involving Turkey.

The Kurds are an ancient ethnic group spread

across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They were not recognised as a distinct group by the Ottomans, and this lack of designation has carried into the secular Turkish Republic. The Kurds are ethnically and linguistically different from the Turks, but legally have had their identity forcibly removed – there is no provision in Turkish law for different ethnicities, all citizens are considered Turks. This is the baseline for the division in Turkey between Kurds and Turks, but the origins of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict are deeper. In 1924, the new Turkish Republic abolished the Kurdish caliphate system, which allowed for some autonomy of the Kurds in their territories. As a result, combined with the Treaty of Lausanne that guaranteed the territory of modern Turkey as it is today, this angered the Kurds, who launched successive revolts in 1925 and 1927. A third rebellion in 1936 resulted in the crushing defeat of the Kurdish forces, and the banning of non-Turkish nationality – effectively banning Kurdish-ness.

The origins of the current conflict lie in the creation of the nationalist and socialist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in 1978. Headed by Abdullah Ocalan, the party provided a platform for Kurds to air their grievances against the government, namely calling for language and cultural expression in their territories. These calls for expression and eventually autonomy fell on deaf ears, and in 1984, the PKK launched an insurgency against the Turkish state. This conflict ended in 2000, with many thousands of people dead and villages destroyed. However, the major turning point in the conflict and context for the current conflict comes from 1998, when Ocalan was forced to flee from Syria (his long time hideout) to Italy. In Europe, he was rejected asylum and entry on terrorism charges, and was arrested in Kenya years later. From prison, Ocalan called for Kurdish unity, and for Kurdish fighters to leave Turkey. This call for unity led to the creation of Kurdish political parties, and Kurdish engagement with the Turkish state. In 2008, remnants of the PKK formed the Peace and Democracy Party, and in 2009 the Erdoğan government allowed for Kurdish broadcasting rights, amnesty for PKK fighters, and the teaching of Kurdish in schools. However, the stigma around the PKK and the Kurds as terrorists remains, despite the political advances of Kurdish political parties.

The current conflict is another flare-up of tensions, but additional factors in the Middle East region led to the conflict. In 2015, the Kurdish People's Democratic Party won a large enough share in parliamentary elections to force president Erdoğan to form a coalition. A short time later, the terrorist group Daesh bombed a Kurdish town, killing nearly 30 civilians. PKK leader Ocalan accused the Turkish military of not doing enough to prevent the attack, seemingly as the attack affected Kurds, not Turks. Following this attack, a reportedly Daesh-initiated suicide bomb at a political rally in Ankara killed over 100 people – and the Turkish government blamed the attack on PKK terrorists, despite the attendance of pro-Kurdish protesters. This led to the breakdown of a Turkish-Kurdish ceasefire, and combat operations in Turkey's east began once more.

In the first two months of 2016, more than 140 Turkish police officers and soldiers died, and as of March 2016, nearly 350 000 civilians have been displaced within the Kurdish regions. Turkish army vehicles and armoured vehicles are currently laying siege to Kurdish towns and imposing curfews in Kurdish territories. For the Turkish military, “curfew” is more related to encirclement and the total siege by armoured vehicles of a town rather than imposing timed curfews on civilians. This is, however, not an equal conflict. Troop numbers are unavailable for either side in this conflict, but the Turkish army is roughly 700 000 strong overall. However, discrepancies appear when hardware and training are discussed. Nearly 470 000 Turkish troops are conscripts, and as a whole, the Turkish land forces lack more sophisticated intelligence technology to take on the industrious Kurds. The Kurds, meanwhile, have gained access to new weapons previously unavailable, such as shoulder-fired missiles allegedly used to neutralise a Turkish military helicopter. This asymmetrical conflict is taking a toll on Turkey at a time when its public resources are stretched thinly by other conflicts.

There are other factors at work in the Middle East that have contributed to the rise of Turkish-Kurdish tensions and conflict. The Arab Spring revolutions of December 2010 and January 2011 greatly destabilised the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and nowhere more than in Syria. Syria has been locked in a civil war

since 2011, and many millions of Syrians have been internally displaced as well as forced to flee Syria's territory. Turkey has absorbed some 2.73 million refugees from Syria, and is attempting to control its porous borders both to its south and to its west, with Europe. Simultaneously, Turkey has agreed to support the US in fighting Daesh in Syria. This support, in late July 2015, has coincided with the start date of the Turkish initiating strikes against Kurdish militants. This creates a problem for Turkey and the US, as the US is working closely with Kurdish groups in Syria to help combat Daesh. Some Kurdish troops are originally from Turkey and Iraq, and having an American ally launch airstrikes against their homelands is deeply unsettling. Turkey is even launching airstrikes against PKK and Kurdish positions in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Turkish government has stated that they will not tolerate a new Kurdish state on their Syrian border, and this is the reason for the strikes, but one must not forget the labeling of the PKK as terrorists as a potential reason for Ankara to attack the Kurds.

To formally discuss the issue of the Kurdish "question" in security terms, this essay will begin to discuss how the Turkish government has securitised the perceived threats, and to whom. The Turkish government initially securitised the issue when they designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation. This designation was strengthened in 2002, when the US, EU, and UK governments added the PKK to their terrorism watch lists. Immediately, the issue was classified as disruptive militancy, and thus warranted military measures to combat the Kurds. The question of why the Turkish government opposes Kurdish nationalism or advancement in any shape or form is simply answered as: Turkey values territorial integrity and stability above all else. President Erdoğan in particular, favours a stable state with all citizens working together for mutual benefit. However, the Kurds have never shared in this vision, as they have clamoured for an independent Kurdish state, and have always fought against the Turkish state. This places the Kurds and their political and militant organisations firmly in the "terrorist" category for the Turks. A clear statement to support this is by president Erdoğan himself, quoted as, "My people don't want to see those supported by the separatist terrorist organization

in parliament," in reference to a recent vote to lift political immunity from Kurdish political parties in parliament in light of the violence, which passed into law. The view that the Kurds are terrorists is clearly outlined by the Turkish government, which has responded to the Kurdish conflict as it felt necessary. Immediately, one can also see, in Erdoğan's comment, the use of a "we" followed by an implicit "they." The "we" is to refer to Turks, or those who are not Kurds, whilst the "they" is to refer to those who do identify as Kurds. This method of othering is not meant to dehumanise the Kurds; rather, it is to securitise the conflict even further. As nationality beyond Turkish-ness is outlawed, anyone in opposition to this can be perceived as a threat to Turkish society and state.

The Turkish government has declared the Kurdish PKK terrorists, and have used this designation both to convince their allies of the PKK's terrorist-hood as well as to quell this perceived threat – but this warrants the question, "What have the PKK done to receive this designation?" Following this question is where this essay will examine, in conjunction with the Turkish government's securitisation of the Kurdish conflict, the concept of "one [person's] terrorist is another [person's] freedom fighter." The PKK have used tactics, often learnt from other organisations labelled as terrorists, that warrant the terrorist label. For example, in the current conflict, PKK soldiers (or militants – either term carries a certain unavoidable politics) have been seen to use improvised explosive devices, similar to those used in Iraq by al-Qaeda, which has become Daesh. It is primarily the use of tactics that differentiate the Kurds and the PKK from other rebel groups. However, one must question whether the term "terrorist" is a term of convenience for the Turkish government. Certainly, the PKK has received training from terror organisations such as al-Qaeda, but according to the Atlantic Council, the use of well-trained snipers has been heavily written about in Turkish media. These snipers are reportedly veterans from fighting in northern Syria for Rojava.

Numerous other tactics typical of insurgencies have been employed by the PKK in eastern Turkey, including civilian bomb attacks and hostage taking of Turkish soldiers in the past. The case

for making the PKK a terrorist organisation is also legally described. The US State Department, in its definition of a foreign terrorist organisation, clearly states in criterion 3: “The organization’s terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security (national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests) of the United States.” This description clearly marks the PKK as a terrorist organisation for the United States – the PKK threatens the territorial security of an American ally – and if Turkey were to apply this domestically, then the PKK would also fit as a terrorist organisation. One possible explanation for the turn to traditional extremist or terrorist tactics by the PKK could be the realisation that traditional military tactics would never work against a formal military force. For the relatively under-equipped PKK, the Turkish military is still a formidable force. This statement may be in defence of the “freedom fighter” term for the PKK, but regardless of position taken, the PKK has used extreme tactics to fight a war against a superior military force.

Erdoğan has made several speeches regarding the Kurdish conflict, comments which may show that he stands to gain from attacking the Kurds. Before the November 2015 elections, Erdoğan stated that the PKK and the Kurds were the number one threat to Turkey at that time. His comments and securitisation were successful, as the public did indeed reference the Kurds as the most pressing threat, and Erdoğan was elected as president again. From the Kurdish perspective, some Kurdish politicians believe that Erdoğan has used an agreement with the US to fight Daesh as a reason to fight the Kurds instead. This follows that Erdoğan and Ankara fear the territorial gains made by Kurds in Syria, and fear the existence of both Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan.

In summary of the above arguments, the Turkish government securitised the Kurdish conflict and the PKK by declaring these actors as threats to several aspects of Turkey. The Turkish government declared the PKK and the Kurds a threat to national unity, as non-Turkish nationality is outlawed, yet the Kurds are identifying as a separate ethnic group. The Kurds are perceived as a threat to Turkish territory as defined by the Lausanne treaty, and therefore must be stopped from accomplish-

ing their territorial ambitions. Finally, the Turkish government perceives the Kurds to be terrorists, as they have and do employ terrorist tactics, which were learnt from other terrorist organisations in the region. These tactics have been used to capture and kill Turkish soldiers and civilians, and therefore warrant the terrorist designation. These three arguments form the core of the Turkish government’s claim to securitise the Kurdish conflict, and they have done so successfully. The next section of this essay will discuss Ankara’s attempt to persuade its allies not to become involved in the Kurdish conflict – desecuritising the issue – and the responses of its allies.

Two months after the beginning of violence between the Turkish government and the PKK, president Erdoğan requested that Turkey’s allies, notably the US and NATO countries, refrain from commenting and interfering in its conflict with the Kurds. This desecuritisation of Turkey’s conflict with the Kurds is interesting to discuss, as desecuritisation is largely a vague topic and can take numerous forms. However, desecuritisation can be seen as akin to depoliticisation:

“the analyst in making an evaluation of a particular securitisation, must always determine the nature of the security relations in relation to the alternative - politicisation - and determine whether or not the securitisation achieved a better overall policy than the politicisation could have done. To reiterate, this evaluation of positive/negative does not result from the analyst’s personal preferences, but rather must follow a rigorous analytical and practical evaluation of what kind of security best addresses insecurity.”

As this is an interpretation of what desecuritisation can mean, Turkey’s move to “play down” the issue of the Kurdish conflict to its neighbours is but one example of numerous desecuritisation attempts in different conflicts and issues in different spaces and times. However, the Turkish case is significant, because it entails a government engaged in a war that it has already securitised domestically – but is requesting outsiders not interfere. It is different, in that Turkey never securitised the issue to a non-domestic audience prior to its desecuritisation. It has become a dichotomy of pursuing a threat at

home, but abroad convincing other national actors that the Kurdish conflict is not an issue to be concerned about.

As mentioned towards the beginning of this paper, the Turkish campaign against the PKK and the Kurds coincided with the agreement to allow the US military use of Turkish air bases to fight Daesh from Turkey. This has raised concerns regarding the Turkish government's true intentions – largely, the US is worried that the Turkish government is using the excuse of supporting strikes against fundamental Islamic militants by striking against the PKK, as the PKK are listed as terrorists. As discussed earlier, the president stood to gain politically at election time by quelling a Kurdish resistance and appealing to Turkish nationalists. As quoted by a senior Turkish official when discussing the desecuritisation of the Kurdish conflict:

“Turkey will share its experience with world leaders to seek support to prevent the Middle East from becoming a region that exports terrorism to the world... The Prime Minister will also highlight that certain countries and organisations should refrain from attitudes that encourage and support PKK and other groups for permanent stability in the Middle East.”

In essence, whilst the Turkish government has lent itself legitimacy by ensuring the case for maintaining the PKK's position on the terrorist organisation list is proven, it has taken the opportunity to request that its allies refrain from becoming involved. But this is not the only factor for Turkey's action against the Kurds. The Turkish military has been able to act with only minor criticism from its allies, and in the subsequent arguments, the responses of the US and the EU will be analysed.

It is pertinent to note that the US and the EU are the strongest allies of Turkey, and play two separate roles. The US is largely the military support, with its origins in the stationing of missiles on Turkish soil to contain the Soviets in the Cuban Missile Crisis. As noted earlier, the US needed the use of Turkish air bases in order to launch attacks on Daesh. Crucial to the American mission to combat Daesh has been the support of the Kurds in Rojava. The US has relied heavily on the Kurdish

People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ), and sacrificing their support to please Turkey is not in American interests.

The US has been attempting to wade through a political quagmire that has become the Syrian conflict. Daesh has claimed vast swathes of land across Syria and Iraq, but various groups are attempting to force Daesh to retreat. The US has been relying on the Kurdish militias, who have drawn troops from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey to help fight against Daesh. However, this has angered Turkey – Turkey views the Kurdish militias as terrorists, seeing as they have links to the PKK. These links are not well established nor are they easily seen: these links entail the interchangeable identities of fighters on the ground, some weaponry and financial support to the Kurdish militias, and political support for the Kurdish territories of Rojava. American support of the Kurdish militias in Syria has naturally angered the Turkish government, as the government does not believe there is a difference between Kurdish groups—they are all PKK affiliates, and are all threats.

The US, however, has valued the support of the Kurds enough that they have disregarded the Turkish government's objections to the American military's support of Kurdish troops. Earlier in 2016, the US military withdrew its support for a deal struck between Turkey and the US, that the US would support troops in Syria that are Arab. The US had fought alongside Kurdish troops enough to see that the Kurds were the more able and organised force in the region, and determined again that it was in American interests to support the Kurds in larger military operations. According to the US military, these operations were carried out with the support of the Turkish government, despite being angered by American indignation against siding with supposed terrorists.

There are tensions brewing between the US and Turkish governments over the issue of supporting Syrian Kurds – noticeably, the US has stayed relatively silent on the conflict in eastern Turkey. The US has requested that the Turkish military refrain from shelling Kurdish troops in Syria – the Turkish military frequently targets Kurdish militia that are attacking targets near the Turkish border, as Turkey believes these targets, once secured, could

strengthen the Kurdish hold on territory in northern Syria. Effectively, the US is having to support two allies, which are fighting each other. But the US has been silent on the issue of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The US has an interest in maintaining the support of both Turkey and the Kurds fighting in Syria. However, Turkey has more capacity to assist the US, by providing air bases and supply lines. The lack of any securitisation or politicisation of the Kurdish conflict may be partially respecting the wishes of the Turkish government, a strong NATO ally, as well as wishing to maintain relations with Turkey due to the strategic importance of Turkey in regional and global affairs.

The European Union and Turkey have a much deeper relationship, and the EU is largely the political and economic supporter of Turkey. Turkey conducts the majority of its trade with the EU in a Customs agreement from 1995; Turkey applied for EU membership in 1999, and has been working through the accession agreements since. The major strain in relations between the Turkish government and the EU is over the Syrian refugee crisis. To reiterate, Turkey has absorbed 2.73 million refugees from Syria and needs more support from allies to help deal with the rising cost of supporting the major influx of people into its territory. But many refugees have used Turkey as a transit country in order to make their way to the EU. As has been heavily publicised, the co-ordinated (or lack thereof) response to the refugee crisis has been draining on the EU and its member countries. As such, the EU and the Turkish governments have worked to arrange a deal on how to deal with the crisis. In the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, several crucial policy points include: the returning of refugees crossing from Turkey to Greece illegally; the agreement to resettle a refugee processed in Turkey into the EU for every refugee returned to Turkey from Greece, and a humanitarian assistance package of 3 billion EUR to help Turkey in settling, housing, and feeding Syrian refugees within its borders. This is in exchange for accelerating the accession process of Turkey into the EU, and the lifting of visa restrictions of Turkish nationals to travel in the Schengen zone.

The agreement has already encountered implementation issues due to concerns over human

rights abuses by the Turkish authorities of Syrian refugees – an issue that could be exacerbated should the EU criticise Turkey's involvement against its Kurdish population. Reportedly, Syrian refugees are facing starvation, imprisonment, and lack of access to medical treatment in Turkish internment camps, which the EU and its member states have criticised. The EU has withheld the relaxing of visa requirements for travel in the Schengen zone, due to these humanitarian concerns. The Turkish government has been steadfast, and has threatened to cancel the agreement entirely should the EU continue to refuse the deal's provisions.

Should the Turkish government unilaterally rescind its agreement to the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, this would cause all progress in mitigating the Syrian refugee crisis to crumble. The EU needs Turkish support in the crisis, but the loss of that support is nearing, as the Turkish government is dictating the rules to the EU. The EU allowed a certain amount of discretion for the Turkish government to determine who is sent to the EU and who is forced to stay. As of the present, the Turkish government has approved a disproportionate amount of ill and injured Syrians to travel to the EU, whilst banning Syrian academics and doctors from travel.

With the Turkish government requesting that its allies refrain from commenting or interfering in the Kurdish conflict, the EU is very nearly prevented from overriding Turkey and securitising the issue. The EU is dependent on Turkish support: should the Turks be angered further, the deal will fall apart. Yet the EU has been more vocal about the conflict than the US has been. In two statements, the EU has spoken out against the human rights abuses in eastern Turkey. From one MEP came the statement, "We also express our concern about the escalation of violence in the southeast of Turkey, which caused almost 400,000 people to leave their houses," and from the EU's Foreign Policy chief Federica Mogherini:

"There is a need to restart the Kurdish peace process. The European Union recognizes that PKK is a terrorist organization, but there is a need to re-engage from the Turkish authorities' side with the Kurdish political representatives and the ones that

express their position in a peaceful way.”

Perhaps most forceful in its convictions of the conflict is the Council of Europe, from which Nils Muiznieks commented after a visit to the region, “respect for human rights has deteriorated at an alarming speed in recent months in the context of Turkey’s fight against terrorism.”

However, these comments do not place the conflict into a realm that requires the EU to react. From the quotes above, it is clear that the EU has placed the conflict into a human security, or humanitarian, sphere, which only requires a diplomatic response from EU officials. As such, Turkey responded diplomatically, and nothing more has been said between the two parties regarding the conflict. The EU is unwilling to compromise Turkey’s support for dealing with the refugee crisis, and the Turkish government understands this, and knows it can act with impunity from the EU. The Turkish government has accumulated vast political capital with the EU, and has used that to its advantage in deflecting any real criticism by the EU.

In summary, the US and the EU face too great a risk when confronting the Kurdish conflict. Both actors are heavily invested in different respects in Turkey, and both depend on the support of the Turkish government for their security and foreign policy objectives to succeed. Yet both actors have manoeuvred the issue using differing methods, in spite of grudging support from the Turkish government. The US military has accepted that there are links between Kurdish militant groups and the PKK, and has gone against Turkey’s wishes in supporting the Syrian Kurds whilst maintaining silence as per the

Turkish-Kurdish campaign. For the EU, it cannot risk losing Turkey as an ally, as Turkey is the EU’s bridge to the Middle East. Therefore, it has commented on the bare minimum regarding the conflict, and politicised the issue as a humanitarian, not a security, threat.

Ultimately, Turkey has succeeded in both securitising the Kurdish conflict domestically whilst successfully desecuritising the conflict to its foreign allies. Turkey’s goal is to quell any sort of Kurdish and PKK resistance within its territory, as it views the PKK and the Kurds both as terrorists and illegal organisations that threaten Turkey’s society and nationality. As well, the conflict has become a matter of convenience for the president, as he was able to turn the conflict into votes for him during the November 2015 elections. Simultaneously, the Turkish government successfully convinced its allies that the conflict was not for their attention. This is due to both the US and the EU needing to maintain Turkey as an ally in the Middle East. Whilst this has come with some pushback by both the EU and the US, Turkey has maintained its stance and used its political capital as a key ally to fend off serious criticisms. The conflict is relatively young, and is part of a larger conflict spanning Syria and Iraq, but nevertheless it is pitting allies of the US against each other, and the US is forced to please both actors in order to accomplish its goals. As well, the EU is being forced to sit tight and not comment on the matter, as it cannot risk losing Turkey in the Syrian refugee crisis. The Kurdish conflict is splitting allegiances and forcing actors to prioritise foreign policy over human rights, and is indeed a security threat in the Middle East and European region.

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