

Renewed war in the Kurdish regions of Turkey

Andreas Speck and Hülya Üçpınar

Since August 2015 the conflict between the Turkish government and Kurdish groups in the Kurdish regions of the country has been escalated into a new spiral of violence, with hundreds of deaths on both sides and a deteriorating humanitarian crisis, accompanied by grave violations of human rights from arbitrary imprisonment to extra-judicial killings. Only months before, on 28 February 2015, a ten-point peace plan (called the Dolmabahçe agreement) was announced by the government and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), reportedly with backing by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)¹, after a fragile ceasefire between PKK and the Turkish military since 2013. However, everything began to unravel at the latest after the general elections of June 2015, which left the Justice and Development Party (AKP) short of an absolute majority and brought the pro-Kurdish HDP into Parliament.

On 17 July 2015, President Erdoğan declared that he “*by no means, accept[s] the expression of [the] Dolmabahçe agreement*”, and that “*An agreement cannot be made with those who lean their backs on the terrorist organization [PKK]*”². Since then, as Nigar Göksel, Senior Turkey Analyst of the International Crisis Group puts it, “*President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reversed a decade of openings, resorting to measures reminiscent of the military-dominated 1990s, when Kurdish nationalists were routinely jailed. On 28 July, he called for HDP leaders to be stripped of parliamentary immunity; two days later, criminal probes were initiated against them for 'inciting violence and carrying out terrorist propaganda'*.”³

Since then, it's all out war and repression, not only in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey.

From peace negotiations to renewed war

The renewed escalation of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict started already before the general elections of 7 June 2015. When it became clear that the pro-Kurdish HDP would pass the 10% threshold for entering parliament, attacks against the party's offices intensified. On 5 June, only two days before the elections, two bombs exploded at a HDP rally in Diyarbakir, killing four people and injuring hundreds. A month earlier, bombs at two HDP offices injured six people in southern cities of Adana and neighbouring Mersin⁴.

The results of the general elections of 7 June, which left Erdoğan's AKP without a majority to form a government, have to be seen as a milestone in the escalation that followed:

- On 20 July 2015, a suicide bomber killed 33 mostly young people in the Turkish town of Suruç, near the border with Syria. The victims were mostly socialist or leftist youth on their way to the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane to help with reconstruction there, following months of assaults by ISIS. The Turkish government blamed the attack on ISIS⁵.
- Two days later, on 22 July, two policemen were killed in Ceylanpınar, Şanlurfa. While first PKK claimed responsibility for the attack “*in revenge for the deaths in Suruç*”⁶, the organisation later withdrew that statement and claimed the attack was committed by the group Apocu Fedailer, which is not formally linked to PKK.
- One day later, on 23 July 2015, a Turkish soldier was shot from across the border with Syria in Kilis.

1 Nigar Göksel: *A New Cycle Begins in Turkey-PKK Conflict*, blog.crisisgroup.org, 11 August 2015, <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2015/08/11/a-new-cycle-begins-in-turkey-pkk-conflict/>

2 Daily Sabah: *Erdoğan renounces Dolmabahçe declaration, says HDP should try its best for PKK's disarmament*, 17 July 2015, <http://www.dailysabah.com/kurdish-issue/2015/07/17/erdogan-renounces-dolmabahce-declaration-says-hdp-should-try-its-best-for-pkks-disarmament>

3 Nigar Göksel: *A New Cycle Begins in Turkey-PKK Conflict*, blog.crisisgroup.org, 11 August 2015, <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2015/08/11/a-new-cycle-begins-in-turkey-pkk-conflict/>

4 See: *Two explosions hit Kurdish political rally in Turkey*, The Guardian, 5 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/05/two-explosions-kurdish-peoples-democratic-party-rally-turkey>, accessed 6 February 2016. Two of the injured died of their injuries later, raising the death toll to four.

5 See: *Suruc massacre: 'Turkish student' was suicide bomber*, BBC News, 22 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33619043>, accessed on 6 February 2016

6 See: *Suruc massacre: 'Turkish student' was suicide bomber*, BBC News, 22 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33619043>, accessed on 6 February 2016

The Turkish government held ISIS responsible for the attack.

- According to news reports, US President Obama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan discussed on 22 July 2015 an agreement providing the US with the use of Incirlik airbase in Turkey for its operations against ISIS⁷. The deal also included a de-facto “no-fly” zone for the Syrian air force in northern Syria. It is unclear if the shooting of the Turkish soldier by ISIS on 23 July was a reaction to this agreement.
- On 24 July, the Turkish air force began bombing position of ISIS in Syria⁸, but also used the opportunity to bomb PKK positions in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq⁹. These attacks were intensified in the following days¹⁰, and Turkish president Erdoğan declared that “*it is not possible for us to continue the peace process with those who threaten our national unity and brotherhood*”. PKK responded by saying that the air strikes rendered the peace process meaningless, but stopped short of formally pulling out of the peace process¹¹.
- This marked the beginning of a further escalation of violence from both sides, with police and military killed by PKK, and many alleged PKK militants killed by Turkish security forces. On 28 July, Turkish planes bomb PKK positions in Sirnak in the Kurdish region¹², marking the beginning of air strikes against Kurdish groups also within Turkey.
- In response, following the example of the town of Silopi on 10 August 2015, several Kurdish towns and neighbourhoods declared self-government: Silopi, Cizre, Batman's Baglar neighbourhood, Diyarbakir's Sur district, Lice, Silvan, Varto, Bulanik, Yuksekova, Semdinli, Edremit, Van's Hacibekir neighbourhood, Istanbul's Gazi neighbourhood, and Dogubeyazit. These declarations were often accompanied by practical measures, such as digging trenches¹³. It was these towns and neighbourhoods that would bear the brunt of the repression in the weeks and months to follow. Cizre was the first to suffer a 24h total curfew, lasting nine days from 4 to 12 September 2015¹⁴.

It's war:

Humanitarian crisis and state repression in the Kurdish regions

The aforementioned developments were just the beginning of a new spiral of oppression and gross human rights violations not only in the Kurdish region of Turkey – where some towns and neighbourhoods suffered under 24h total curfews often lasting several months – but also all over Turkey.

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- 7 See for example: *Turkey To Let U.S. Use Incirlik Air Base For ISIS Airstrikes, Officials Say*, The Huffington Post, 23 July 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turkey-incirlik-us-isis-airstrikes_us_55b140dee4b08f57d5d41257, accessed 6 February 2016; *US deal with Turkey over Isis may go beyond simple use of an airbase*, The Guardian, 24 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/us-deal-turkey-isis-incirlik-airbase-erdogan-obama>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 8 See: *Turkey carries out first ever strikes against Isis in Syria*, The Guardian, 24 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/turkish-jets-carry-out-strikes-against-isis-in-syria-reports>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 9 See: *Turkish jets hit Kurdish militants in Iraq and Isis targets in Syria*, The Guardian, 24 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/25/turkish-jets-hit-kurdish-militants-in-iraq-as-well-as-isis-targets-in-syria>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 10 See: *Turkey steps up bombing of Kurdish targets in Iraq*, The Guardian, 29 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/29/turkey-launches-biggest-attack-kurdish-militants>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 11 See: *Turkey says Kurdish peace process impossible as Nato meets*, The Guardian, 28 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/turkey-erdogan-not-possible-peace-process-kurdish-militants>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 12 See: *L'armée turque pilonne le PKK dans le sud-est*, Le Figaro, 28 July 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2015/07/28/97001-20150728FILWWW00246-l-armee-turque-pillone-le-pkk-dans-le-sud-est.php>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 13 See: *Turkish Kurdistan: Town after town declares self-government in face of war*, GreenLeft Weekly, 22 August 2015, <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/59841>, accessed 6 February 2016
- 14 See: *Turkey to lift curfew in cut-off city of Cizre after reports of civilian deaths*, Deutsche Welle, 12 September 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-to-lift-curfew-in-cut-off-city-of-cizre-after-reports-of-civilian-deaths/a-18710280>, accessed 6 February 2016

Curfews and urban warfare

The first curfew was declared on 16 August 2015 in Varto (Muş), initially “until further notice in order to provide security”¹⁵. This curfew did only last 20 hours¹⁶, and was a first taste of what was to follow. Since then “there have been 58 officially confirmed, open-ended and round-the-clock [all day long] curfews in at least **19 districts of 7 cities** in Southeastern Turkey. These cities are as follow; **Diyarbakır** (32 times), **Şırnak** (7 times) and **Mardin** (11 times), **Hakkâri** (4 times), **Muş** (1 time), **Elazığ** (1 time) and **Batman** (2 times)”, according to a report by the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV) from early February 2016¹⁷. More curfews have been declared since.

At the time of writing, curfews are still in force in three cities/districts;

- Sur (the very centre of Diyarbakır): The first curfew was declared on 16 October 2015. Since then, a total of six curfews have been declared. A day-long curfew is still in force since the declaration of last curfew on 11 December 2015.
- Cizre (Şırnak); Curfews have been declared in total five times 4 September 2015. The last one, declared on 14 September 2015, continues since 2 March 2016 as a night-time curfew.
- İdil (Şırnak); Day-long curfew, declared on 16 February 2016, is still in force..
- Nusaybin (Mardin): Round-the-clock curfew declared on 13 March 2016.
- Yuksekova (Hakkari): Round-the-clock curfew declared on 13 March 2016¹⁸.

During the curfews, Special Operations Police teams and other security forces are conducting counter-terrorism operations against the armed Kurdish youth movement, using armoured vehicles and sometimes tanks and heavy artillery against their barricades. The supporters of the Kurdish armed group have dug trenches, often planted with explosives and erected barricades to seal off neighbourhoods¹⁹.

According to Parliamentarians from the Republican People's Party (CHP) 24-hour curfews often lasting several weeks have never before been used in the history of Turkey. They also underline that such a practice was not even used during times of a military coup or during emergency rule²⁰.

Amnesty International has claimed the government's military response was marred by “gross human-rights violations” and amounted to a “collective punishment” against the Kurdish population.²¹

”Local residents, caught in the crossfire, bear the brunt of the violence. According to research conducted by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Peoples’ party (HDP), an estimated 290 have been killed in areas across south-east Turkey since the first curfews were declared in August, 25 of whom died in Sur. The Turkish general chief of staff has said about 200 armed militants have been killed in clashes, as well as 60 military and police, but reliable numbers are hard to obtain.” says Constanze Letsch from the Guardian

See: Sur, Turkey: residents pay price of violence as curfew enters fourth month, The Guardian, 3 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/turkish-police-kurd-activists-clash-diyarbakir-curfew>

15 See: *Curfew declared in Turkey's east over clashes with PKK militants*, Hürriyet Daily News, 16 August 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/curfew-declared-in-turkeys-east-over-clashes-with-pkk-militants.aspx?PageID=238&NID=87012&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 8 March 2016

16 See: *Curfew in Eastern Province is Over*, Bianet, 17 August 2015, <http://bianet.org/english/people/166874-curfew-in-eastern-province-is-over>, accessed 8 March 2016

17 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey: <http://en.tihv.org.tr/recent-fact-sheet-on-curfews-in-turkey-between-the-dates-16-august-2015-5-february-2016/>, accessed 8 March 2016

18 See: *Curfews declared in two southeastern Turkish towns before large operations*, Hurriyet Daily News, 13 March 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/fresh-curfew-declared-in-southeast-turkeys-yuksekov.aspx?PageID=238&NID=96363&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 19 March 2016

19 Human Rights Watch: *Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths*, 22 December 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>, accessed 8 March 2016

20 “Diyarbakır-Mardin” *Değerlendirme Raporu* (“Diyarbakır-Mardin” Evaluation Report), p.34 (the report is written upon the visit on 9-10 February 2016 and publicized on 1 March 2016); also see: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chp-report-says-locals-in-southeast-turkey-torn-between-pkk-unlawful-practices-of-govt.aspx?PageID=238&NID=95871&NewsCatID=339>, accessed 8 March 2016

21 See: Amnesty International: *Turkey: Onslaught on Kurdish areas putting tens of thousands of lives at risk*, 21 January 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/turkey-onslaught-on-kurdish-areas-putting-tens-of-thousands-of-lives-at-risk/>, accessed 16 March 2016

The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV) estimated that at least 1.377.000 residents have been affected by the curfews, with fundamental rights such as the right to life and the right to health being violated. From 16 August 2015 (the date of first declared curfew) until 5 February 2016 **at least 224 civilians (42 children, 31 women, 30 people over the age 60)** lost their lives in the regions and during officially declared curfews²². However, it is not surprising that for the Turkish government all those killed are considered “terrorists”.

The renewed fighting and oppression also causes a new wave of internal displacement. According to a report by the intelligence and anti-terror departments of the police, more than 100,000 people have been displaced in five towns in the region, with 1.3 million people being affected by the repeated curfews²³. NGOs and opposition parties put the figure of internally displaced persons much higher: as many as 200,000 civilians had to leave their homes²⁴. Surprisingly, the number of people affected by the curfews coincides with the calculations of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey.

It has not been easy to get information on what was going on in the areas under curfew. The first information received from the region was the lack of access to basic needs such as food, electricity, water and health services. During the curfews many people – from 35 days²⁵ to 75 years old – have lost their lives. The information varies: from the people who went out onto the street to buy bread²⁶ or to rush beloved ones to an ambulance²⁷ who were shot by snipers to the dead body of a 10-years-old child²⁸ and on another occasion that of a 53 years old woman²⁹ kept in refrigerators for days since it they were not allowed to bury the corpses.

“Shell casings littered the battle-scared streets of the Sur neighborhood, where residents made a grisly discovery — the corpse of an unidentifiable male. The stench of death also rose from a collapsed building in the same area. Residents said security forces had demolished the building's basement, which was being used a shelter.” writes Dominique Soguel from Associated Press.

Source:

Residents have returned to the town of Cizre, in southeastern Turkey, to find many of their homes destroyed and at least one body still lying inside a ruined house, US News, 2 March 2016
<http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-03-02/turkey-scales-down-curfew-in-mainly-kurdish-town-of-cizre>

Another case is that of three female politician women who were trying to call for help using their cell phones just before they were shot dead³⁰. And the public hopelessly witnessed residents, including children and injured people, remain stuck in basements in Cizre as the government denied access to emergency services. Turkey's Constitutional Court even rejected a petition to allow the evacuation of a building, and as a consequence people in the basements died either of loss of blood or as a result of the operation conducted by security forces.³¹ The exact number of civilians who died in the basements is still not clear but a locally

22 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey: *RECENT Fact Sheet on Curfews in Turkey Between the dates 16 August 2015-5 February 2016*, <http://en.tihv.org.tr/recent-fact-sheet-on-curfews-in-turkey-between-the-dates-16-august-2015-5-february-2016/>, accessed 13 March 2016

23 See: *100,000 people displaced due to clashes with PKK*, Hurriyet Daily News, 24 December 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/100000-people-displaced-due-to-clashes-with-pkk.aspx?PageID=238&NID=92937&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 13 March 2016

24 See: *Turkey's other refugee crisis: Kurds fleeing 'terror' in country's south east*, The Telegraph, 26 February 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12173970/Turkeys-other-refugee-crisis-Kurds-fleeing-terror-in-countrys-south-east.html>, accessed 13 March 2016

25 See: *Curfew in Cizre Lifted for a Second Time*, Bianet, 14 September 2015, <http://m.bianet.org/bianet/people/167622-curfew-in-cizre-lifted-for-a-second-time>, accessed 13 March 2016

26 Mehmet Erdoğan (75) was killed with a shot in the forehead by snipers as he was coming back from the bakery with a bag of bread in his hand. He had said “They will not shoot at the elderly” and insisted to go himself to get bread. Witnesses report that an armed vehicle approached his body afterwards and shot yet another bullet into his head on 11 September 2015. <http://www.yakayder.com/tr/haberler/report-on-the-nine-day-curfew-in-cizre-turkey/365>, accessed 13 March 2016

27 A 3-month-old baby, Miray Ince, has been killed alongside her grandfather in the southeastern province of Şırnak after being struck by a bullet at home, after which her grandfather was also shot dead trying to rush the baby to an ambulance. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/3-month-old-baby-grandfather-shot-dead-in-turkeys-cizre.aspx?pageID=238&nID=93053&NewsCatID=509>, accessed 13 March 2016

28 http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/363255/Caresizlige_abluka..._10_yasindaki_Cemile_nin_cesedi_buzdolabinda_saklandi.html, accessed 13 March 2016

29 Meryem Sune, a 53-year-old mother of seven, could not be buried for two days and her body was first kept cold by ice bottles., <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34206924>, accessed 13 March 2016

30 See: *3 Politician Women Killed in Silopi*, Bianet, 6 January 2016, <http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/170830-3-politician-women-killed-in-silopi>, accessed 13 March 2016

31 See: *Death toll rises among Kurds trapped in Cizre basement amid heavy fighting*, Deutsche Welle, 29 January 2016,

organised crises group estimate that there were at least 178 dead³².

Irreparable damage and the destruction of communities

As a consequence of the use of heavy weapons, many buildings and monuments of historical and cultural heritage have been destroyed and damaged³³. Residential areas have been burned down, or destroyed by shelling, artillery and bombs.³⁴ Whereas it was possible to evacuate some civilians from the conflict zone, they were forced to leave their homes and communities after being bombarded for days. The population of the Sur district in Diyarbakır has decreased from 25,000 to 5-6,000. Some media report that the government is preparing for “urban regeneration projects” in the Suriçi region, which had also been evacuated³⁵. These projects aim at changing the social-demographic make-up of the city, destroying its historical and cultural tissue, and destroying its social memory.

Residents started to return to Cizre following the partial lifting of the curfew. However the first wave of residents who reached Cizre on 2 March in vehicles loaded with personal belongings and their children had to endure a police inspection of their documents as well as a search of the contents of their cars and bags. Finally in Cizre what they found shocked them: totally destroyed buildings, corpses under the ruins, body parts at different places and even in debris of the Tigris River. People describe the situation in Cizre as “a mass grave”.³⁶ In what was left of their homes they could not find any of their personal belongings and personal history³⁷. As a report in Deutsche Welle puts it: “*The city has experienced a kind of destruction without parallel in Western Europe since World War II: street after street has been reduced to rubble, houses with holes in their sides the size of articulated lorries, multi-story apartment buildings burned out leaving only hollow shells, the rooms within them now a trichrome scheme of black, grey, and white ash*”³⁸. According to a report by an investigative committee of the Party of Democratic Regions (DBP) after the lifting of the curfew in Cizre, “*80 percent of the district was damaged due to state forces’ tank shelling*”. In total, “*nearly 500 buildings were completely destroyed*”

Legality of the Curfews

The curfews put in place by the government are based on Article 11/c of Law for Provincial Administration with the justification “apprehending the members of the terrorist organization” and “ensuring the physical safety of the people and their properties”. However, jurists agree that the law in question does not confer upon the local governor the power to impose a measure that affects the rights and liberties of the all inhabitants of a province (city) or a district. According to Article 13 of the Turkish Constitution, such a restriction can only be imposed through a law agreed by parliament. **Curfews declared by governorship’s orders constitute a contradiction with the Constitution.** It is concerning that a measure - impacting on a large number of citizens residing in a particular region of the country - is completely hidden from parliamentary and legal supervision.

Except in times of war, security forces cannot legally use heavy weapons and hardware in settlements where martial law or state of emergency has not been declared, without evacuating civilians. During the planning, command and control of operations alleged to serve the purpose of protecting the lives of civilians from unlawful violence, it is unacceptable to perpetrate arbitrary and disproportionate force which does not accord to the duty of care expected from the state in a democratic society. The lethal force used by the government of Turkey in the aforementioned provinces and districts is currently in gross violation of the principle of proportionality to be ensured between the intended objective and the force used for this purpose in a democratic society.

<http://www.dw.com/en/death-toll-rises-among-kurds-trapped-in-cizre-basement-amid-heavy-fighting/a-19012447>; Security raid kills 60 in southeast Turkey: Report, Press TV, 8 February 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/02/08/449182/Turkey-Sirnak-Cizre-PKK>, accessed 17 March 2016

32 Figures are acquired personally by the authors.

33 The Kurşunlu Mosque (Lead Mosque), which had been built between 1516 and 1520 and named after its lead coated domes, situated in conflict zone in Sur, Diyarbakır, was burned. Surp Giragos Armenian Church and Armenian Catholic Church in Sur were damaged severely. Diyarbakır City Walls, which are on the UNESCO protection list, Four-legged Minaret and Caravanserai built during Grand Vizier Rustem Pasha’s time are also under threat. CHP report p.442. See also: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/blame-game-over-mosque-set-on-fire-in-diyarbakir.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92254&NewsCatID=341>

34 See: *Cizre residents return to destroyed Kurdish-majority town in Turkey*, The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12180895/Cizre-residents-return-to-destroyed-Kurdish-majority-town-in-Turkey.html?frame=3587090>, accessed 13 March 2016

35 See: *Sur’a kentsel dönüşüm*, Hurriyet, 31 December 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/sura-kentsel-donusum-40034036>; Sur’a

whereas more than 2000 buildings were damaged", the report notes³⁹. The CHP report on Sur says that 80 percent of the buildings in Sur are totally destroyed and the other 20 percent are seriously damaged and not suitable for residence⁴⁰.

Mehmet Ceylan, from Sur, carrying a bundle on his back, says "It's always the ordinary people who suffer," "I've lived in Sur for years, and I've never witnessed a scene like this."⁴¹

Impact on local economy

Many workplaces could not be opened, businesses have gone bankrupt and social life has collapsed. According to the People's Republican Party (CHP) 11 thousand artisans/tradepersons were affected by the curfews and more than 100 thousand have lost their jobs in the Sur district⁴². Local businessmen and traders are increasingly desperate. Most shops in Sur are closed, and only a handful of restaurants are open. Hotels in the historic district are empty, or closed altogether. The district, where several local sites were added to the Unesco world heritage list only last year, now resembles a half-destroyed ghost town⁴³. While nearly 90 percent of the businesses in and around Sur have been forced to close, commerce figures have declined an estimated 25 percent throughout the city of Diyarbakir, according to Deutsche Welle⁴⁴.

Breakdown of the education system

The curfews and "counter-terrorism" operations in the Kurdish regions led to a breakdown of the education system, de-facto denying a large part of the population their right to education. Teachers have been sent away from the region and education has been indefinitely suspended. In December 2015, the teachers in Turkey's southeastern Cizre and Silopi districts of Şırnak province received SMS messages from the National Education Directorates informing them that they would be taken into in-service training seminars starting from 14 December 2015. Around 3000 teachers left Cizre and Silopi within one day following the message. The teachers in Cizre were called back to duty as of 2 March 2016, again by SMS message. However many of the school buildings have either been turned into military/police bases or have been heavily damaged as Kamuran Karaca, the Chair of Educators' Syndicate, says⁴⁵.

In the southeastern province of Mardin, 33,000 students were not able to take a nationwide exam set for 25 and 26 November for security reasons. In Mardin's Derik district, 1291 students were not able to take the

[4 milyar liralik dönüşüm](http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sur-a-4-milyar-liralik-donusum-gundem-2173525/), Milliyet, 4 January 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sur-a-4-milyar-liralik-donusum-gundem-2173525/>, accessed 17 March 2016

- 36 See: *Avukatlar AYM'ye başvurdu: Cizre'de ceset parçaları Dicle'ye atılıyor*, Diken, 27 February 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/avukatlar-aymye-basvurdu-cizrede-ceset-parcalari-dicleye-atiliyor/>; 'Cizre koca bir mezarlığa dönmüş', BBC Turkish, 3 March 2016, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/03/160303_cizre_hatice_kamer_izlenim, accessed 17 March 2016
- 37 "Diyarbakır-Mardin" Evaluation Report, p
- 38 See: *Kurds make ends meet in the ruins of Cizre*, Deutsche Welle, 15 March 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/kurds-make-ends-meet-in-the-ruins-of-cizre/a-19115774>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 39 See: *DBP report on Cizre: Nearly 300 people died, town largely damaged*, ANFNews, 14 March 2016, <http://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/dbp-report-on-cizre-nearly-300-people-died-town-largely-damaged>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 40 See: *CHP report: People in Southeast alienated from state due to violence*, CIHAN News Agency, 29 February 2016, <https://www.cihan.com.tr/en/chp-southeast-turkey-pkk-2023751.htm>, accessed 29 February 2016
- 41 See: *Hundreds flee conflict-hit area in southeast Turkey as curfew lifted*, Reuters US, 3 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kurds-idUSKCN0VC1BZ>, accessed 16 March 2016
- 42 "Diyarbakır-Mardin" Evaluation Report, p.14
- 43 See: *Sur, Turkey: residents pay price of violence as curfew enters fourth month*, The Guardian, 3 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/turkish-police-kurd-activists-clash-diyarbakir-curfew>, accessed 16 March 2016
- 44 See: *Conflict in Diyarbakir hits the economy*, Deutsche Welle, 1 March 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/conflict-in-diyarbakir-hits-the-economy/a-19084398>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 45 See: *Teachers Leave Cizre, Silopi*, Bianet, 14 December 2015, <http://bianet.org/english/politics/170134-teachers-leave-cizre-silopi>, accessed 8 March 2016; *Turkey security forces kill 23 PKK militants in Cizre*, BBC News, 17 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35120148>, accessed 8 March 2016; *3 bin öğretmen bir SMS'le Cizre ve Silopi'yi terk etti* (3 thousand teachers left Cizre and Silopi with after SMS), BBC Turkish, 14 December 2015, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/12/151214_cizre_silopi, accessed 8 March 2016; *Öğretmenlere SMS'le Dön Çağrısı*, 4 March 2016, <http://egitimsen.org.tr/ogretmenlere-smsle-don-cagrisi/>, accessed 8 March 2016; *Eğitim-Sen: Bakanlık, öğretmeni öğrencisinden ederek suç işliyor!*, 13 December 2015, <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/egitim/egitim-sen-bakanlik-ogretmeni-ogrencisinden-ederek-suc-isluyor-1007698/>, accessed 8 March 2016

exam because of the ongoing curfew at the time⁴⁶.

Breakdown of health services

Neighbourhood surgeries, hospitals and other health centres have been converted into military and police bases. Snipers are reported to be located over the roof of Cizre State Hospital and armoured vehicles have been placed in the entrance of the hospital. Mouth and Dental health Center and Health Directorate buildings in Şırnak are also converted into encampments. Osman Baydemir, an MP of HDP, submitted a parliamentary questionnaire regarding the conversion of health facilities into military or police bases on 30 December 2015; however, the Ministry of Health did not provide a response⁴⁷.

Health services have been suspended. Serious violations regarding access to health care, including the prevention of access to hospitals for the sick, children, women and the elderly are widespread. Admissions to clinics and emergency services have fallen by 90 per cent.

Ambulances or medical teams for emergency medical care are unable to reach injured civilians. On 6 February 2016, in Sur, 22-year-old Zerrin Uca, in the 7th month of her pregnancy, had a heart attack and she died because the ambulance was unable to reach the street where she was for one and a half hours⁴⁸.

Zerrin Uca is only one of the examples of lack of access to medical care in the areas under curfew.

16-year-old Hüseyin Paksoy was shot on 15 January 2016, and waited despite his injuries. He died from loss of blood on 18 January 2016⁴⁹. Orhan Tunç and Serhan Altun are two others wounded by security forces on 19 January 2016; both lost their lives due to loss of blood⁵⁰. Serhat Altun was injured and died due to lack of medical attention for two days. After the death of Mr. Altun became public, on 20 January 2016, a group of civilians, HDP MP Faysal Sarıyıldız and Cizre Co-Mayors wanted to go to the place where Serhat Altun had died to retrieve his body. Police opened fire and 10 were injured, 2 of whom, Abdülhamit Poçal and Selman Erdoğan, died later on⁵¹.

Cihan Karaman was critically wounded by a canister but an ambulance was not allowed to reach him. According to reports he walked around two kilometers to reach the ambulance, but lost his life because he couldn't continue due to heavy tank fires and had to turn back⁵².

Besides the lack of access for emergency services, those healthcare workers who nevertheless try to provide assistance and care are coming under attack.

46 See: *Terror halts education in southeast Turkey*, Hurriyet Daily News, 25 December 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/terror-halts-education-in-southeast-turkey.aspx?PageID=238&NID=92526&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 13 March 2016

47 Türkiye büyük millet meklisi başkanlığına (Chairman of the National Assembly of Turkey), 30 December 2015, <http://www2.tbmm.gov.tr/d26/7/7-1912s.pdf>, accessed 13 March 2016
Sağlık Emekçileri: Savaş düzenine geçildi, özel hareket hastaneleri karargâh gibi kullanıyor, Sol, 23 December 2015, <http://haber.sol.org.tr/turkiye/saglik-emekcileri-savas-duzenine-gecildi-ozel-harekat-hastaneleri-karargah-gibi-kullaniyor>, accessed 13 March 2016; Hastanelerin karargah olması ve sivil ölümleri Meclis gündeminde, Evrensel, 1 January 2016, <http://www.evrensel.net/haber/268906/hastanelerin-karargah-olmasi-ve-sivil-olumleri-meclis-gundeminde>, accessed 13 March 2016

48 See: *Pregnant woman dies waiting for ambulance after heart attack in Cizre*, ANF News, 6 February 2016, <https://anfenglish.com/women/pregnant-woman-dies-waiting-for-ambulance-after-heart-attack-in-cizre>, accessed 13 March 2016

49 See: *European court condemns Turkey for death of wounded Kurdish teen*, Rudaw, 28 January 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/270120163>, accessed 13 March 2016

50 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey: *RECENT Fact Sheet on Curfews in Turkey Between the dates 16 August 2015-5 February 2016*, 6 February 2016, <http://en.tihv.org.tr/recent-fact-sheet-on-curfews-in-turkey-between-the-dates-16-august-2015-5-february-2016/>, accessed 13 March 2016

51 See *Cizre'de vurulan İMC TV kameramanı Tekin: "Yaralıyken işkence gördük"*, sendika8.org, 21 January 2016, <http://sendika8.org/2016/01/cizrede-vurulan-imc-tv-kameramani-tekin-yaraliyken-iskence-gorduk/>, accessed 13 March 2016; *Kameraman Refik Tekin sivillere ateş açıldığı anda kayıttaydı*, İMCTV, 21 January 2016, <http://www.imctv.com.tr/kameraman-refik-tekin-sivillere-ates-acildigi-anda-kayittaydi/>, accessed 13 March 2016. Also see here the interim measure by ECHR for another injured, Orhan Tunç (Turkish): *AİHM'den Cizre'de yaralı olan Orhan Tunç için de 'tedbir' kararı*, İMCTV, 19 January 2016, <http://www.imctv.com.tr/aihmden-cizrede-yarali-olan-orhan-tunc-icin-de-tedbir-karari/>, accessed 13 March 2016

52 See: *ECTHR Decision Arrives but Ambulance Doesn't: We Lost Cihan Karaman*, Bianet, 25 January 2016, <http://bianet.org/english/law/171455-ecthr-decision-arrives-but-ambulance-doesn-t-we-lost-cihan-karaman>, accessed 13 March 2016

There are sustained attacks on health workers⁵³. Abdülaziz Yural, a nurse and a member of SES (Healthcare Professionals and Social Workers Trade Union) and volunteer with the Cizre Reference Center, was killed by a shot in his forehead on 30 December 2015 while he was trying to provide medical support to an injured. A post-mortem examination showed that the bullet went from up to down. In the following days, pro-government media reported the event by saying “a PKK member was killed during conflicts.” Yural’s body had been held in the morgue for days and then was buried in the garden of the closest mosque.

In the hospitals of the city of Cizre during the curfew, medical staff have been working constantly and during the 79 days of military lockdown were often forced to sleep inside the hospitals as they were unable to reach their homes.

“Security forces were everywhere in the hospital,” one nurse who wished to remain anonymous for her own safety told Deutsche Welle. “They were keeping watch in all our rooms, including the operating room.”

According to the nurse, when someone that security forces believed to be a militant was brought to the hospital the staff would be prohibited from looking after them⁵⁴.

According to the SES union, healthcare workers have also been detained on several occasions⁵⁵.

Arbitrary detentions and extra-judicial killings

The renewed war and repression in the Kurdish region also leads to a high number of arbitrary detentions. Many civilians have been detained by security forces and have been tortured in custody, often at locations other than official detention centres and police stations.

In the course of on the ground research following an earlier curfew in Cizre from 4-12 September 2015, Amnesty International found evidence that several deaths may have been caused by snipers at locations far from where clashes were taking place. Among those killed were children, women and elderly people, who are very unlikely to have been involved in armed clashes. More recently reported deaths have also followed this same troubling pattern. Investigations into deaths have failed to show any sign of progress⁵⁶.

In addition, these violations of the right to life have not been immediately and openly investigated. Trial and punishment of the members of security forces who are involved in violations have been made impossible. The policy of immunity continues to expand and intensify⁵⁷. According to Human Rights Watch, “in the 15 deaths documented by Human Rights Watch, the authorities have failed to complete investigations despite a clear obligation to do so under Turkish domestic and international human rights law”⁵⁸.

Human rights: de-facto suspended all over Turkey

In the current climate of war, oppression and censorship are very prevalent and access to correct and verifiable information is difficult. The right to freedom of speech and freedom of expression has been increasingly curtailed in Turkey, with journalists and entire newspapers or other media the main targets.

Two journalists who Can Dündar, chief editor of Cumhuriyet Newspaper, and Erdem Gül, Ankara representative of the same newspaper, who reported on the involvement of Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency in the supply of weapons to the Syrian opposition, were arrested on 27 November 2015 “releasing secret state documents regarding security of the state for the purpose of political and military espionage and propaganda for terrorist organization despite that they are not a member of the said organization.” Both of them were released after 92 days in prison upon the decision of the Constitutional Court on 25 February

53 See: Appeal of the health labourers for urgent medical and humanitarian aid about regions under curfew, http://www.istabip.org.tr/icerik/rapor_eng.docx, 6 January 2016, accessed 13 March 2016

54 See: Kurds make ends meet in the ruins of Cizre, Deutsche Welle, 15 March 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/kurds-make-ends-meet-in-the-ruins-of-cizre/a-19115774>, accessed 18 March 2016

55 See: Appeal of the health labourers for urgent medical and humanitarian aid about regions under curfew, http://www.istabip.org.tr/icerik/rapor_eng.docx, 6 January 2016, accessed 13 March 2016

56 Amnesty International: Briefing: End abusive operations under indefinite curfews in Turkey, 20 January 2016, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/news-item/briefing-end-abusive-operations-under-indefinite-curfews-in-turkey>, accessed 13 March 2016

57 Human Rights Watch: Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>, 22 December 2015, accessed 8 March 2016

58 Human Rights Watch: Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>, 22 December 2015, accessed 8 March 2016

2016⁵⁹. The reaction of Erdoğan to the decision of the High Court was that “*he has no respect for and would not abide by a court ruling*” that two prominent journalists were unfairly jailed⁶⁰. Although released, the two still face multiple life sentences if convicted of exposing state secrets, espionage, and aiding a terrorist group for publishing reports alleging Turkey tried to smuggle weapons to Islamists in Syria⁶¹.

Their case is only the tip of the iceberg, and possibly the most known case of the repression of journalists. Turkey is ranked 149th out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders⁶². According to the BBC, more than 30 journalists were imprisoned in the country in January 2016, most of them of Kurdish origin⁶³.

Repression does not stop with Turkish journalists. In March 2016, Spiegel correspondent Hasnain Kazim had to leave Turkey after he waited for three months unsuccessfully for the renewal of his press card⁶⁴. And in summer 2015, a Turkish court charged two British Vice News journalists and their translator for 'terror offences' after they filmed in Diyarbakir⁶⁵.

Besides threatening or imprisoning journalists, access to websites is repeatedly blocked. Examples are Dicle News Agency, whose website was blocked for the 29th time since July 2015 by a decision of Telecommunication Directorate on 19 February⁶⁶.

The Turkish Satellite Organisation (TURKSAT) also stopped broadcasting of independent IMC TV channel following a demand from the Ankara Prosecutor's Office on 26 February 2016⁶⁷.

One of the famous TV standup shows was also put under discussion and accused of supporting terrorism because a teacher who called the programme talked about the war, the suffering in the curfew zone and demanded peace. The TV channel (Kanal D) had to make a press release explaining that they do not intend to support any kind of terrorism as a form of self-censorship⁶⁸.

The seizure of the conservative oppositional newspaper group Zaman, linked to the Hizmet movement of Islamist preacher Fethullah Gulen, a former ally and now foe of President Erdoğan, on 4 March 2016 following a court order⁶⁹ was a new qualitative step related to curtailing press freedom in Turkey. Although already the year before two newspapers and two television channels linked with the Hizmet movement were put under state administration, Zaman was the largest oppositional newspaper in Turkey, and its English language sister paper Today's Zaman an important English language source on events in the country. Immediately following its seizure, the paper changed its editorial line and printed a pro-government edition⁷⁰.

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- 59 See: Turkish journalists released from jail after court rules press freedom violated, The Guardian, 26 February 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/26/turkish-journalists-released-jail-court-rules-press-freedom-violated-undar>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 60 See: Turkey's president Erdogan rejects court ruling to free journalists, The Independent, 28 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-rejects-court-ruling-to-free-journalists-can-undar-and-erdem-gul-a6901726.html>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 61 Committee for the Protection of Journalists: CPJ calls on Turkey to drop charges against Cumhuriyet journalists, 26 February 2016, <https://cpj.org/2016/02/cpj-calls-on-turkey-to-drop-charges-against-cumhur.php>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 62 See: Reporters without Borders: Will the EU let itself be humiliated over press freedom in Turkey, 6 March 2016, <http://en.rsf.org/turkey-will-the-eu-let-itself-be-06-03-2016.48888.html>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 63 See: Detained Turkish reporters defiant over espionage claim, BBC News, 19 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35342943>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 64 See: German journalist leaves Turkey after he is refused right to work, The Guardian, 17 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/17/german-journalist-leaves-turkey-der-spiegel-press-card>, access 18 March 2016
- 65 See: Turkish court charges two British Vice News journalists for 'terror offences', BBC News, 31 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-34109186>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 66 See: DiHA'ya erişim 29. kez engellendi, Evrensel, 19 February 2016, <http://www.evrensel.net/haber/272974/dihaya-erisim-29-kez-engellendi>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 67 See: Independent broadcaster IMC TV "blacked out" on satellite, Bugun, 26 February 2016, <http://www.bugun.com.tr/son-dakika/independent-broadcaster-imc-tv-blacked-2079147.html>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 68 See: Kanal D'den Açıklama, kanald.com.tr, 8 January 2016, <https://www.kanald.com.tr/beyaz-show/haber/kanal-dden-aciklama>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 69 See: Turkey seizes control of Zaman newspaper linked to Gulen, BBC News, 4 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35729114>, accessed 18 March 2016
- 70 See: Seized Turkish opposition newspaper toes government line, The Guardian, 6 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/06/seized-turkish-opposition-newspaper-zaman-erdogan-government>, accessed 18 March 2016

Repression of civil society and the right to freedom of assembly

Civil society, and especially those opposing the renewed war in the Kurdish regions and demanding peace through a return to negotiations have been the target of increasingly arbitrary state repression and of intimidation by Erdoğan and government officials. One well known case is the repression of the signatories of a statement signed by more than 1400 academics, 1128 from Turkish universities, which called for the lifting of the curfews and for a permanent peace settlement. After the publication of the statement, which was also signed by international academics such as Noam Chomsky, David Harvey, Immanuel Wallerstein, Judith Butler, and Etienne Balibar, President Erdoğan immediately declared the signatories a target, and most Turkish media launched a defamation campaign against the signatories.. Some racist and ultra-nationalist leaders of criminal organizations encouraged by the attitude of authorities and media even threatened academics with death. Additionally, administrative and judiciary investigations were launched against the signatories, and some were detained⁷¹. While 505 academicians have subjected to prosecutions, 37 of them have lost their jobs because of their signatures⁷².

According to the daily news reviews of Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, the number of organisations and people subjected to investigation and/or prosecution as being a member of a terrorist organisation as a result of a demonstration or of expressing their opinion on social media or in articles are countless⁷³.

Late November 2015, Tahir Elçi, renowned human rights and peace activist, and the head of Diyarbakır Bar Association, was assassinated during a press conference to protest the destruction of an historical monument in Sur district of Diyarbakır and while he had been making a statement calling for an end to violence between the Turkish state and the Kurdish rebel group the PKK⁷⁴. Shortly before his death, Tahir Elçi stated "*PKK is not a terrorist organisation*" and was subjected to a smear campaign by the government and the media⁷⁵. In the ongoing investigation of Elçi's death, access to the investigation file has been restricted and evidence has been suppressed or defaced, in order to protect those responsible.

Criticising President Erdoğan or the government also often leads to juridical procedures and potential a criminal trial with the result of being fined or imprisonment⁷⁶.

Following the latest (at the time of writing) car bomb attack in Ankara on 13 March 2016, President Erdoğan vowed to widen the definition of terrorism. He said there was no difference between "*a terrorist holding a gun or a bomb and those who use their position and pen to serve the aims*" of terrorists and added that this could be a journalist, a lawmaker or an activist⁷⁷. Given the widespread repression of civil society even before this statement, this can only be seen as a thinly veiled threat against civil society and any criticism of Turkey's actions in the Kurdish regions.

Oppression of the HDP

The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is a special target of state repression, and is frequently being accused of being a mere extension of the PKK. Already in July 2015, President Erdoğan urged the parliament to strip HDP parliamentarians of their immunity from prosecution, in order to have them "pay the price" for allegedly

71 Julian de Medeiros: Turkish academics deserve solidarity: the fight for academic freedom is global, openDemocracy.net, 18 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/julian-de-medeiros/turkish-academics-deserve-solidarity-fight-for-academic-freedom-is-global>, accessed 13 March 2016; Turkish prosecutors to investigate academics over Erdoğan petition, The Guardian, 14 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/turkish-prosecutors-investigate-academics-criticised-erdogan-petition>, accessed 13 March 2016

72 See: 'Cadı avı'nın bilançosu: 505 akademisyene soruşturma, 37 akademisyenin işine son, diken.com.tr, 3 March 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/akademisyenlere-baris-cezasi/>, accessed 13 March 2016

73 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV): Daily Human Rights reports, <http://en.tihv.org.tr/category/gunluk-insan-haklari-raporlari/>, accessed 13 March 2016

74 See: Pro-Kurdish lawyer Tahir Elci shot dead in Turkey, BBC News, 28 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34952954>, accessed 13 March 2016; HDP co-chair 'certain' that bullet from police weapon killed Tahir Elçi, Hurriyet Daily News, 1 December 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-co-chair-certain-that-bullet-from-police-weapon-killed-tahir-elci.aspx?pageID=238&nID=91922&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 13 March 2016

75 Amnesty International: Turkey: End judicial harassment of lawyer Tahir Elçi, 21 October 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/2719/2015/en/>, accessed 13 March 2016

76 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey: Daily Human Rights Reports, <http://en.tihv.org.tr/category/gunluk-insan-haklari-raporlari/>, accessed 13 March 2016

77 See: Ankara bombing: Erdogan seeks to widen terrorism definition, BBC News, 14 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35807987>, accessed 19 March 2016

having links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)⁷⁸.

The HDP has repeatedly stated that it is opposed to violence and wants a peaceful solution for Turkey's Kurds. In August 2015, HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas called on Kurdish militants to halt a month of violence against the security forces "without ifs or buts"⁷⁹.

But HDP is nevertheless accused of supporting PKK, for example claiming "that municipalities administrated by the HDP provide assistance to PKK by digging trenches and establishing roadblocks to claim control over cities"⁸⁰.

Many activists and even elected representatives (councillors, mayors) of HDP have been detained, and/or are subject of criminal investigations. At present, several motions to lift the immunity of HDP parliamentarians are pending in the Turkish parliament⁸¹. According to Freedom House's 2016 Freedom in the World report, "over 40 HDP mayors were arrested or removed from office", and between July and November 2015 alone "roughly 500 HDP members and officials, including over 20 elected mayors, were taken into custody on terrorism charges"⁸².

If anything, the situation has worsened since. In January, riot police raided HDP's Istanbul office and detained senior local officials and activists of the party⁸³.

On 26 February, Twenty-two people who were detained in an operation at the HDP office in the western province of Kocaeli were taken to the court⁸⁴. And on 9 March among 22 detained for "making terrorist propaganda" in Izmir were the provincial head of the HDP and other local and provincial party officials⁸⁵.

Detentions of HDP mayors also continue, as the case of Emine Esmer, the co-mayor of Şırnak's Silopi district demonstrated early March 2015⁸⁶.

In addition to actions against individual party activists or representatives, the threat of a ban of HDP is always in the air. Mehmet Ali Şahin, deputy chairman of AKP warned that HDP could face a ban in December 2015⁸⁷,

Why now? Attempts to understand the return to war

It seems difficult to understand why all this is happening now, after it seemed the AKP and Erdoğan were trying to address at least some concerns of the Kurdish population of Turkey, which makes up about 20% of the total Turkish population, and after a ceasefire and some kind of peace process since 2013. However, we think there are a series of explanations which come together to explain the return to war and repression in

- 78 See: Proceedings summary prepared to lift HDP co-chair's immunity, Hurriyet Daily News, 29 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=86106&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 79 See: Pro-Kurdish leader calls on PKK to halt violence, Middle East Eye, 23 August 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/pro-kurdish-leader-calls-pkk-halt-violence-1210457633>, accessed 19 March 2016; see also: Turkey's Kurdish leader Demirtas calls for ceasefire with PKK, Deutsche Welle, 9 August 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-kurdish-leader-demirtas-calls-for-ceasefire-with-pkk/a-18636579>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 80 See: Turkey: HDP municipalities accused of providing assistance to PKK terrorists, Daily Sabah, 22 August 2015, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/08/22/turkey-hdp-municipalities-accused-of-providing-assistance-to-pkk-terrorists>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 81 See: Motion at Turkish Parliament to lift HDP deputy's immunity over terror propaganda, Daily Sabah, 16 March 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/03/16/motion-at-turkish-parliament-to-lift-hdp-deputys-immunity-over-terror-propaganda>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 82 See: Freedom House. Freedom in the World 2016: Turkey, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/turkey>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 83 See: Turkish police raid HDP offices in Istanbul, detain party members, Hurriyet Daily News, 8 January 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-police-raid-hdp-offices-in-istanbul-detain-party-members.aspx?pageID=238&nID=93589&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 19 March 2016
- 84 See: Detained HDP Members Taken To Court, en.haberler.com, 26 February 2016, <http://en.haberler.com/detained-hdp-members-taken-to-court-886941/>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 85 See: HDP İzmir head among 22 detained in anti-terror operation, Hurriyet Daily News, 9 March 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-izmir-head-among-22-detained-in-anti-terror-operation.aspx?pageID=238&nID=96218&NewsCatID=509>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 86 See: District mayor from pro-Kurdish party detained, Cihan News Agency, 4 March 2016, <https://www.cihan.com.tr/en/pro-kurdish-party-emine-esmer-2028985.htm>, accessed 13 March 2016
- 87 See: AK Party official warns pro-Kurdish HDP that it could be banned, Todays Zaman, 26 December 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20160119040311/http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_ak-party-official-warns-pro-kurdish-hdp-that-it-could-be-banned_408018.html (copy at archive.org), accessed 19 March 2016

Kurdish regions. What relevance each one of them has is difficult to say, and each of them on its own might seem very relevant. However, we think in combination they do give us some idea about why this is happening now.

1. There was never a genuine peace process or “Kurdish opening”

It can be questioned whether there ever was a genuine peace process. As Simon E. Waldman and Emre Caliskan point out: *“The deterioration of Turkish-Kurdish relations does not constitute a breakdown of the peace process quite simply because there was no real peace process to begin with. All the main components of a genuine process of reconciliation between Kurds and Turks were lacking.”*⁸⁸

This might sound strange at first sight, given the “Kurdish Opening” announced by then Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2009. But, as Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker state: *“confronted with the emerging ‘Kurdish spring’ and its loss of legitimacy in the Southeast, [the AKP] announced a ‘Kurdish Opening’ (Kürt açılımı) of its own. Ostensibly a major attempt to resolve the ‘Kurdish issue,’ as it is framed from the Turkish national perspective, this rather bold move was really ... aimed at containing the Kurdish movement and wresting back political control of the region for the party. This was a battle for the right to claim representation of Turkey’s Kurds (over 15 million people, around 20% of the total population of Turkey) and political control of the Southeast (about a sixth of Turkish territory by area).”*⁸⁹

The so-called Kurdish Opening was accompanied by an upsurge in judicial investigations and arrests of activists deemed to be PKK members and then the banning of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) on 11 December 2009⁹⁰, followed by a renewed wave of repression.

Four years later the pattern was very similar: again a pro-Kurdish party – the HDP – gained votes from the AKP in the Kurdish provinces, this time even passing the 10% threshold on the national level. Soon after, the AKP government officially abandoned the peace process and increased repression against Kurdish civil society. The November 2015 “snap elections” that followed – and took place in a climate of repression and violence – saw the AKP regain some of its lost ground in the Kurdish provinces, but not sufficiently to push the HDP below the 10% threshold and out of parliament.

It can be asked whether the peace process and the Dolmabahce agreement of 28 February 2015 were mainly aimed at guaranteeing AKP hegemony in the Kurdish provinces and in Turkey generally than at peace. Once this strategy did not work – partly due to developments south of the border, in Syria – it did no longer serve a purpose and was abandoned.

2. The war in Syria changed the AKP's and Erdoğan's calculations

It is impossible to disentangle the renewed war in the Kurdish regions of Turkey from the war in Syria, and what is happening in Syria – or especially what happened in Rojava (the Kurdish provinces in Syria) – impacted and impacts the ability of the AKP to maintain its support in the Kurdish regions of the country – in fact, the elections on 7 June 2015 saw AKP support plummeting in the Kurdish provinces.

Turkey has been an active player in the Syrian civil war, with a clear objective of toppling the Syrian regime. Turkey supports a range of Syrian opposition groups, especially of Islamist tendencies such as Ahrar ash-Sham⁹¹ and Jaysh al-Islam⁹², and the country has repeatedly been accused of also supporting the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra-Front⁹³ and ISIS⁹⁴, the latter two especially to counter the Syrian Kurds. Turkey's Prime

88 Simon A. Waldman and Emre Caliskan: *The Peace Process that Never Was: Turkey and the PKK*, 3 August 2015, <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/the-peace-process-that-never-was-turkey-and-the-pkk/>

89 Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker: *Turkey's Kurdish Movement and the AKP's Kurdish Opening: A Kurdish Spring or Fall?*, In: Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (ed): *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, 2013, Costa Mesa (California): Mazda Publishers.

90 See: *Turkish top court bans pro-Kurdish party*, BBC News, 11 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8408903.stm>, accessed 7 February 2016

91 See: *One of Syria's most powerful rebel groups is rebranding itself with Turkey's backing*, Business Insider, 8 October 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ahrar-al-sham-in-syria-and-turkey-2015-10>, accessed 5 March 2016

92 See: *Is Turkey sending troops to Syria?*, Hürriyet Daily News, 9 May 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/is-turkey-sending-troops-to-syria.aspx?pageID=238&nID=82168&NewsCatID=466>, accessed 5 March 2016

93 See: *Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria*, The Independent, 12 May 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html>, accessed 5 March 2016

94 Russia keeps providing what they consider evidence of Turkey's support of ISIS. However, we do not consider this as reliable

Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said in an English language interview with Al-Jazeera on 23 February 2016 that “if the Syrian people are still there, defending their land, it is because of our support.”⁹⁵

As a consequence of the ongoing civil war in Syria, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has ties with PKK, took control of significant part of the region that borders Turkey. The Turkish government considered this a potential threat, not only because these territories could host PKK infrastructure, but more so because they might emerge as de facto independent states. “In response, Turkey cut off supplies to the Kurdish-run territories even as they were assaulted by ISIS forces. The refusal to aid Syria’s Kurds against ISIS (...) inflamed Turkey’s ethnically Kurdish population, which broadly supported efforts to defend Syrian Kurds”⁹⁶, writes Chris Miller, associate director of the Grand Strategy Program at Yale University. Indeed, during the Kobanî crisis Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan referred to the PYD as a terrorist organisation.

And when in June 2015 the YPG/YPJ took “over the border city of Tel Abyad from ISIS, Erdoğan reacted angrily and announced that ‘We will never allow the establishment of a state in Syria’s north and our south. We will continue our fight in this regard, no matter what the costs. We will not turn a blind eye to this.’ This reaction shows how Erdoğan has always been far more comfortable with ISIS-controlled territory on the Turkish border than with the Kurdish experiment in autonomy.”⁹⁷ In fact, as İrfan Aktan writes, minutes of meetings between imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and a team of HDP, which now have been published as a book, indicate clearly that the peace talks became deadlocked “primarily because of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its accomplishments in neighboring northern Syria, or Rojava, as the Kurds call the area. The canton system established by the PYD appears to have prompted Turkey to reject Öcalan’s offer to ‘give up the war.’”⁹⁸

This hasn’t changed since, and maybe has even become more obvious. In January 2016, the Turkish government strongly opposed the participation of representatives of the PYD/YPG in one of the latest failed attempts to negotiate a settlement to the ongoing civil war in Syria because they were a “direct threat to Turkey”⁹⁹. Later the same month, Erdoğan challenged the US over their support for the PYD/YPG, asking rhetorically “Are you on our side or the side of the terrorist organizations?”¹⁰⁰. Turkey regards the YPG as a terrorist organisation and an offshoot of PKK, while the US regards them as one of the most efficient partners in its war against ISIS.

Only a few days later, Turkey’s Armed Forces began to bomb positions of PYD/YPG near its borders. Among the targets shelled by Turkey is the Menagh airbase, which was seized by the YPG-allied Arabic Jaish Al-Thuwar brigade on 11 February from Syrian Islamist rebels of the Levant Front (a Salafist group), and the Al

information, especially as Russia is a party to the war on the side of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. However, there are also other reports, for example: *Turkey sends in jets as Syria’s agony spills over every border*, The Observer, 26 July 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/26/isis-syria-turkey-us?CMP=share_btn_tw, accessed 5 March 2016; *Islamic State attacks Kurdish-held town on Turkish border*, Reuters, 27 February 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-telabyad-idUKKCNOW00EQ>, accessed 5 March 2016; *ISIS sees Turkey as its ally: Former Islamic State member reveals Turkish Army cooperation*, Newsweek, 7 November 2014, <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920?rm=eu>, accessed 5 March 2016; Robert Fisk: *Syrian soldiers on the Latakia Front finally taste the fruits of victory – but they know Isis is not dead*, The Independent, 18 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-isis-syrian-army-russia-turkey-al-rabaa-assad-a6882281.html>, accessed 5 March 2016

- 95 See: Turkish PM Davutoglu voices support for Syrian people, Diplomat News Network, 23 February 2016, <http://diplomat.so/2016/02/23/turkish-pm-ahmet-davutoglu-voices-support-for-syrian-people/>, accessed 6 March 2016; the Al-Jazeera interview can be accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2016/02/turkish-pm-attack-pay-price-160223073208847.html> (video)
- 96 Chris Miller: *Big Win by Turkey’s AKP Signals Vote for Stability. Decisive win for AKP in Turkey could add pressure for peace deal with Kurdish PKK militants*, YaleGlobal, 3 November 2015, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/big-win-turkey%E2%80%99s-akp-signals-vote-stability>
- 97 Yvo Fitzherbert: *Erdoğan sacrifices peace to entrench his own power*, Roar Magazine, 3 August 2015, <https://roarmag.org/essays/turkey-pkk-erdogan-conflict/>
- 98 İrfan Aktan: *Is Turkey crushing Kurdish self-rule in Syria?*, Al-Monitor, 19 February 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/02/turkey-syria-kurds-pyd-ypg-ankara-crush-kurdish-self-rule.html#>, accessed 6 March 2016
- 99 See: *Syria peace talks: Turkey will not allow Kurdish groups to join meeting of those opposed to Assad regime*, The Independent, 19 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-peace-talks-turkey-will-not-allow-kurdish-groups-to-join-meeting-of-those-opposed-to-assad-a6821996.html>, accessed on 14 February 2016
- 100 See: *Turkish president questions relations with US over Syrian Kurdish groups*, Hurriyet Daily News, 10 February 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-questions-relations-with-us-over-syrian-kurdish-groups-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=94998&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 14 February 2016

Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front¹⁰¹.

3. The end of AKP hegemony since Gezi Park and Rojava

The protests all over Turkey sparked by the protests in Gezi Park in 2013 were a first sign that there is growing discontent within Turkey with the politics of Erdoğan and his AKP. While the protests started on 27 May in Istanbul's Gezi Park next to Taksim Square and were aimed at protecting the park against one of Erdoğan's urban development projects (another shopping mall), a violent police eviction caused a wave of protests all over Turkey. Within two weeks, some 3.5 million people (from a population of 80 million) had taken part in almost five thousand demonstrations across Turkey¹⁰². According to Erdem Yörük and Murat Yüksel, "an estimated 16 per cent of Istanbul's population joined the protests, some 1.5 million people. In İzmir, Turkey's third largest city, the figure was half a million"¹⁰³. In the end, the project was put on hold.

However, according to the Turkish doctors' organisation, the protests took a heavy human toll: eight people died, at least four as a result of police violence. About 8,000 were injured, 104 sustained serious head injuries and 11 people lost an eye, most as a result of plastic bullets fired by the police¹⁰⁴.

The Gezi Park protests were about much more than protecting some trees in an urban park, they were the first challenge to the AKP government in general and Erdoğan in particular. And although the government gave in on the immediate demand of protecting Gezi Park, following the end of the protests a wave of repression started. Many of those who had supported, reported on, or even tweeted the protests lost their jobs. Some faced criminal charges; hundreds were still on trial a year later¹⁰⁵.

In the end the AKP was able to patch over the cracks and the challenge to its hegemony and recovered from the Gezi Protests. Erdoğan won the 2014 presidential elections with slightly more than 51% of the votes. But more importantly, Gezi Park created a new culture and practice of civil disobedience and resistance, organizing, and cooperation of grassroots groups, independent of the old-fashioned political parties. As anthropologist and journalist Ayşe Çavdar puts it: "Gezi fundamentally changed the foundations and the language of politics. This is new because Gezi doesn't suggest any power practices. Quite the contrary – Gezi is a certain outlook on life, it's the practice of judging power. It suggests ethical guidelines for all of us"¹⁰⁶.

The next crack in AKP's hegemony was caused by the siege of Kobanî in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) by ISIS in autumn and winter 2014, and the Turkish government response. As mentioned earlier, the AKP government is extremely worried about a de-facto autonomous Kurdish region south of its border in Syria, similar to Iraqi Kurdistan. And president Erdoğan equated the Kurds of Kobanî and their defenders with the jihadi assailants. "It is wrong to view them differently, we need to deal with them jointly" he said in October 2014.¹⁰⁷

As the consequence, when the siege unfolded and ISIS captured large parts of Kobanî, Turkey refused to provide any support, nor to allow Kurdish fighters from Iraq or even fighters of the Free Syria Army (parts of which Turkey supports) to enter Kobanî from Turkey (the only possible access at the time), nor did it allow

- 101 See: *Syria conflict: France urges end to Turkish assault on Kurds*, BBC News, 14 February 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35572747>, accessed 14 February 2016; *Rojava Update 184: SDF confirm control of Menagh Airbase and nearby village. Are they about to takeover Azaz?*, 12 February 2016, <http://www.petercliffordonline.com/syria-and-iraq-news/>, accessed 14 February 2016; *Reuters.com: Turkey strikes Kurdish militia in Syria, demands it withdraw*, 13 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-shelling-idUSKCN0VMOQ0>, accessed 14 February 2016; *Reuters.com: Kurdish forces said to take air base near Turkish border*, 11 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VKOE8>, accessed 14 February 2016
- 102 Christopher de Bellaigue: *Turkey: 'Surreal, Menacing...Pompous'*, *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/12/19/turkey-surreal-menacing-pompous/?pagination=false>, accessed 21 February 2016
- 103 Erdem Yörük and Murat Yüksel: *Class and Politics and Turkey's Gezi Protests*. In: *New Left Review* No 89, October 2014, pp103-123, <http://newleftreview.org/II/89/erdem-yoruk-murat-yuksel-class-and-politics-in-turkey-s-gezi-protests>, accessed 21 February 2016
- 104 See: *A year after the protests, Gezi Park nurtures the seeds of a new Turkey*, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>, accessed 21 February 2016
- 105 See: *A year after the protests, Gezi Park nurtures the seeds of a new Turkey*, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>, accessed 21 February 2016
- 106 See: *A year after the protests, Gezi Park nurtures the seeds of a new Turkey*, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>, accessed 21 February 2016
- 107 See: *Kobani: anger grows as Turkey stops Kurds from aiding militias in Syria*, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/08/kobani-isis-turkey-kurds-ypg-syria-erdogan>, accessed 21 February 2016

supplies to reach the town. Only much later, at the end of October – and under pressure from the USA – did Turkey allow some 150 Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters cross through Turkey to Kobanî¹⁰⁸.

Nevertheless, in the end the YPG and Free Syria Army managed to drive out ISIS from Kobanî, supported by US air strikes. While Kobanî did not fall to ISIS, the Turkish unwillingness to provide support had important political repercussions in Turkey.

The siege of Kobanî sparked protests in Turkey, and especially in the Kurdish regions. After clashes on 7 October 2014, tanks and armoured vehicles were deployed to impose curfews in the predominantly Kurdish cities of Diyarbakir, Batman, Bingol, and Van, as well as other areas¹⁰⁹. This now almost seems like a prelude to what is happening now in the Kurdish regions of Turkey.

But more importantly, it broke the AKP in the Kurdish regions. While conservative Kurds, who form about 40% of the voting population of the Kurdish regions in Turkey, until then had voted for AKP, many of them switched to the HDP, driven away from AKP in horror about Turkey's failure to support Kobanî¹¹⁰. On the other hand, fighters from the PKK, however, assisted its Syrian Kurdish YPG and the Iraqi peshmerga in the fight against ISIS, coming to the defense of Kobanî when Turkish forces did not, thus increasing their legitimacy also in the Kurdish regions of Turkey¹¹¹. This not only allowed HDP to pass the 10% threshold, but more importantly it deprived the AKP of its majority.

4. The so called “immigration crisis” and the “war on ISIS” make Turkey more powerful

The war in Syria and the humanitarian crisis it is causing (plus the ongoing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc) have increased Turkey's geostrategic position, or, to say it differently: maybe now the European Union and the USA need Turkey more than Turkey needs them.

The USA have been keen on having Turkey in their anti-ISIS coalition, and Turkey was long hesitant. Turkey joined the US-led anti-ISIS coalition formally in September 2014 during a meeting at a NATO summit¹¹². As The Guardian pointed out in July 2015, “*Erdoğan had focused more on thwarting Kurdish separatist ambitions in lawless parts of Iraq and Syria than on defeating terrorists*” and Turkey's “*intelligence services have been accused of secretly backing Isis and other Islamist groups as a means of containing the Kurds*”. This did not change much, although in July 2015 Turkey allowed the USA to use its Incirlik airbase and possibly other airbases for operations against ISIS¹¹³, and Turkey started a few bombing raids on ISIS position in Syria, but used the opportunity to also hit PKK positions.

It is unknown what else the agreement between the USA and Turkey might have included, but given Turkey's hesitation to join the anti-ISIS coalition and its hostility to the USA supporting the Syrian-Kurdish YPG and US refusal to designate the YPG as a terrorist organisation, it is likely that Turkey received nothing in return – which could be the USA looking the other way in the face of Turkish repression of its Kurdish population. As Nate Shenkkan, project director of Freedom House's Nations in Transit project, writes: “*Turkey has offered increased support for the coalition in a successful bid to mute any U.S. criticism of the assault on the Kurds*”¹¹⁴.

In the same line, the renewed and very outspoken warnings of Erdoğan to the USA to choose between the YPG and Turkey as allies following a bomb attack in Ankara on 17 February 2016 that killed 28 people, and

108 See: *Kurdish peshmerga forces enter Syria's Kobani after further air strikes*, Reuters, 31 October 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN0IK15M20141031>, accessed 21 February 2016

109 See: *While Kobane burns*, The Economist, 11 October 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21623795-reluctance-strike-may-redound-turkeys-president-while-kobane-burns>, accessed 21 February 2016

110 Soner Cagaptay: *Kurds Can Go Their Own Way. Erdogan Faces Upheaval—Here's What He Should do About It*, Foreign Affairs, 22 September 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-09-22/kurds-can-go-their-own-way>, accessed 21 February 2016

111 Jenna Krajeski: *The Consequences of the Battle for Kobani*. The New Yorker, 26 February 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-consequences-of-the-battle-for-kobani>, accessed 21 February 2016

112 See: *U.S. Forms Anti-ISIS Coalition at NATO Summit*, Time, 5 September 2014, <http://time.com/3273185/isis-us-nato/>, accessed 21 February 2016

113 See: *US deal with Turkey over Isis may go beyond simple use of an airbase*, The Guardian, 24 July 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/us-deal-turkey-isis-incirlik-airbase-erdogan-obama>, accessed 21 February 2016

114 Nate Shenkkan: *Turkey Goes Back to War with Itself*, Freedom At Issue Blog, 9 September 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/turkey-goes-back-war-itself>, accessed 6 March 2016

repeated statements that he had no doubt that the Syrian Kurdish YPG carried out the attack or was involved¹¹⁵, although the Kurdish splinter group Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK) claimed responsibility¹¹⁶, might in fact be more a sideshow to ensure the USA's silence in relation to the Kurdish regions of Turkey.

In relation to the European Union, Turkey is in an even stronger position. Turkey is a major receiving country for Syrian refugees, with estimated more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Turkey is now also the major transit routes for migrants especially from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to the European Union. Of the more than 1 million migrants that entered the European Union in 2015, about 80% arrived in Greece from Turkey¹¹⁷. After initial chaos in the European Union, there is now increasing consensus to “stem the flow of migrants” at the EU's border, resulting in pressure on Greece to step up its border controls, and an agreement with Turkey worth 3 billion Euros plus revived EU-Turkey membership negotiations. In return, Turkey committed itself to clamp down on its borders and keeping refugees in the country¹¹⁸, and a deportation agreement whereby it would take back those migrants whose asylum applications were not successful in EU member states. Less than two months later, Turkey already started to ask for more money from the EU¹¹⁹ as a contribution to the more than 10 billion Euros the country has already spent on Syrian refugees. At the time of writing, the EU and Turkey are negotiating a new agreement involving EU financial aid of 6 billion Euros¹²⁰.

Given both, the USA's and the European Union's need for Turkish cooperation, Turkey is in a strong position to expect silence on what it is doing in its Kurdish region in return for the cooperation requested. Even without an official request, it is unlikely that the USA or the EU will criticise Turkey too loudly given that they need Turkey more than Turkey needs them.

5. A renewed Kurdish nationalism

But the events of the last few years – and above all the “battle of Kobanî” - also changed Turkish-Kurdish perceptions. As Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe write, it “*created a new Kurdish nationalist myth of heroism and liberation. Kobane will endure as a famous victory – regardless of the devastation caused – of huge symbolic value for Kurdish sentiment across the region.*”¹²¹ The myth of Kobane and Rojava – the Kurdish name for South Kurdistan – also inspired many Kurdish people in Turkey, above all youth.

Thus, when state repression increased in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, a high level of indignation not just about the repression itself fuelled by the indignation about Turkish inaction or sabotage of the defence of Kobanî in 2015, combined with the renewed Kurdish nationalism and the inspiration of Kurdish self-rule according to the concept of “democratic confederalism” (whether a myth or true) also brought many people to stand up to repression using tactics similar to those used in Kobanî. The declarations of self-determination of many Kurdish towns and neighbourhoods and the digging of trenches in or around these areas were one desperate and futile expression of this renewed nationalism, and of a feeling of “enough is enough”.

115 See: Erdoğan to Obama: Turkey to stop shelling YPG only if YPG, Russia, Assad abide by Munich deal, Hurriyet Daily News, 21 February 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-to-obama-turkey-to-stop-shelling-ypg-only-if-ypg-russia-assad-abide-by-munich-deal.aspx?PageID=238&NID=95473&NewsCatID=352>, accessed 21 February 2016

116 See: Turkey bombing: Kurdish TAK group says it attacked Ankara, BBC News, 19 February 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35617147>, accessed 21 February 2016

117 UNHCR: A million refugees and migrants flee to Europe in 2015, Press release, 22 December 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/567918556.html>, accessed 21 February 2016

118 See: Migrant crisis: Turkey and EU strike deal to limit refugee flow, BBC News, 29 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34957830>, accessed 21 February 2016

119 See: Turkey wants more money from EU after €3bn migration deal, Turkish PM says, The Telegraph, 22 January 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12114332/Turkey-wants-more-money-from-EU-after-3bn-migration-deal-Turkish-PM-says.html>, accessed 21 February 2016

120 See: Migrant crisis: EU and Turkey plan one-in, one-out deal, BBC News, 6 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35749837>, accessed 13 March 2016

121 Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe: *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*. Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme, July 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf, accessed 9 February 2016

Putting it all together

All these different developments cannot be separated from the AKP's and above all Erdoğan's ambitions for power and hegemony within Turkey. Erdoğan's decision to abandon the post of Prime Minister (which, according to the Turkish constitution, has real power) and opt to become the first directly elected president in August 2014 (a constitutionally merely symbolical role) was linked to the plan to transform Turkey into a presidential democracy, similar to the French or US model. Possibly over-ambitious, the AKP and Erdoğan were very confident they would get the necessary 2/3 majority in parliament to change the Turkish constitution. They did not want to see the cracks opening up in AKP's hegemony with Gezi Park, and the breakdown of AKP's position in the Kurdish regions following the siege of Kobanî in autumn and winter 2014.

The constitutional change was and is a crucial element of AKP's strategy for maintaining its hegemony, as AKP, even though it lost the absolute majority in June 2015 (to regain it in November) is the only party even close to 50% of the voter support, and a united opposition is unlikely. Thus, a presidential system, which by its very nature favours a competition between only two candidates, will likely keep AKP in power for a long time – or so the calculations.

Embracing – or making use of – the Kurds was part of the strategy to get the support needed to change the constitution. After Kobanî it became clear that this strategy did no longer work. The only option for the AKP then is to on the one hand bring the Kurdish HDP back down under 10% (and therefore out of parliament), and to appeal to the voters of the nationalist MHP. Consequently, the idea of peace and (very limited) Kurdish autonomy is now a thing of the past – it does not appear possible to rebuild support for the AKP in Kurdish regions, and any attempt to do so will alienate nationalist voters.

Added to this is the threat of a Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria, and the empowering impact that might have on the Kurds in Turkey – something which can already be observed since July 2015. The Syrian-Kurdish PYD and their self-protection units YPG stand in the way of Erdoğan's and the AKP's strategy for Syria, which relies on supporting a range of Islamist opposition groups. Engaging PKK in the Kurdish regions of Turkey is also a way to keep PKK occupied, so that they cannot aid and support YPG/PHD in Syria, as they did during the siege of Kobanî.

In many ways, the AKP's and Erdoğan's strategies for Turkey and for the Middle East are completely shattered. Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, who was supported by Turkey – was ousted by Egypt's military under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, bringing to an end the short-lived alliance between the two countries. Turkey's strategy in Syria seems to also be failing, with the negative side-effect of a strengthened de-facto autonomous Kurdish region to the south of Turkey's borders. And as a consequence the AKP's attempts to gain support in the Kurdish regions lie in ruins (and blood).

In a way, the present renewed war in the Kurdish region of Turkey and the increasingly arbitrary and brutal repression of any oppositional voices all over Turkey (such as the repression of almost 1000 academics who signed a statement against the events in the Kurdish regions of Turkey) can be seen as a desperate (and violent) attempt to achieve what could not be achieved otherwise. Erdoğan and the AKP are wounded and desperate, and they do not have a plan B. This makes them even more dangerous, as they will do whatever seems useful to make their plan A work. The victims will not only be the Kurds, but the prospects for democracy and social justice in Turkey.

(This article was finished on 19 March 2016)

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Andreas Speck is an antimilitarist activist now living in Spain. From 2001 until 2012 he worked in the international office of War Resisters' International in London. He has been involved with supporting nonviolence and antimilitarism in Turkey for more than 20 years, and is now active with the *Red Antimilitarista y Noviolenta de Andalucía* (RANA – Andalusian Antimilitarist and Nonviolent Network) and *La Transicionera*, a Sevilla based project aimed at supporting nonviolent transitions towards just and sustainable societies.

Hülya Üçpınar worked as a human rights lawyer for many years, and has been involved with the nonviolent movement in Turkey since the very beginning. She now works as nonviolence trainer and human rights activist and lives in Istanbul.