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Power-Mad Erdogan Launches War in Attempt to Become Turkey's Supreme Leader

By Mike Whitney
July 31, 2015

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lost his bid to become Turkey's supreme leader in last month's elections. So he's taken the country to war to increase his popularity and improve his chances of victory in snap elections in November.

Turkish bombers continued to pound Kurdish positions in Northern Iraq early Thursday after killing an estimated 100 Kurds a day earlier. Erdogan broke off peace talks with the Kurdish militias and launched this latest assault after failing to win enough seats in Parliament to change the constitution. The ambitious Erdogan needed 330 deputies to make sweeping changes to the constitution that would give the president unlimited executive power making Erdogan de facto emperor of Turkey. His plan was frustrated by the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) that won an unprecedented 13 percent of the vote. The HDP is determined to prevent Erdogan from realizing his dream of becoming Turkey's imperial sultan. The current war against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq is designed to whip up nationalist sentiment in order to put Erdogan "over the top" in elections that could come as early as this Fall.

Here's more from Huffington Post:

"Last month, only after losing his party's parliamentary majority, President Erdogan realized that there are dangerous terrorists in neighboring Syria who are a threat to Turkey's

security ... Rather than intending to fight ISIS terrorists or cooperate with United States military operations in Syria and Iraq, Erdogan's real purpose is to consolidate his own hold on power and accomplish the following self-serving objectives:

1) Turkey's President realizes that should his ruling party fail to form a coalition government by the end of August, he would be obliged to call a new round of parliamentary elections in November. Therefore, by taking bold actions against ISIS and Kurdish fighters, Erdogan hopes that Turkish voters would give his party the few extra seats needed to regain a majority in Parliament.

...The Turkish President's self-serving fake war against terrorism could have the tragic consequence of escalating the violence throughout Turkey and neighboring countries. If Ankara is truly interested in countering the Jihadists, it should have done that long ago, instead of arming and abetting ISIS and other terror groups." (Erdogan Is Pursuing Turkish Self-Interests, Under the Guise of Fighting ISIS, Harut Sassounian, Huffington Post)

Here's more from Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, David L. Phillips:

"Erdogan is angling for new elections. He is trying to discredit the People's Democratic Party (HDP), a pro-Kurdish party which received 13.1% of the votes and will be seated in parliament for the first time. Erdogan is furious with the HDP for its strong showing, which denied the AKP enough support to change the constitution and establish an executive imperial presidency. In retaliation, Erdogan is threatening to lift the parliamentary immunity of HDP legislators. He's even intimated at closing the HDP for supporting the PKK." (Turkey's Dark Future, David L. Phillips, Huffington Post)

Are we saying that Erdogan has started a war with the Kurds with the sole intention of enhancing his own political power?

Yes, that's exactly what we're saying. This is a story about a power-hungry megalomaniac, not a struggle against Kurdish militias and certainly not a war against ISIS. In fact, Erdogan has been ISIS greatest friend as this blurb from the UK Independent points out:

"There is no doubt that ability to move backwards and forwards across the 550-mile long Syrian-Turkish border has been crucial to the growth of the jihadi movements in Syria since 2011. The thousands of foreign volunteers who have flooded into Syria have almost all come from Turkey. Even those unable to speak Turkish or Arabic have had little difficulty in making their way across. In many respects, Turkey has provided a safe sanctuary for Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra, playing a similar role as Pakistan does in support of providing safe haven for the Taliban in Afghanistan." "A Syrian rebel offensive led by Jabhat al-Nusra was allegedly masterminded from an operational headquarters inside Turkey and was the outcome of a closer understanding between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar." (Suruc suicide attack: Bombing shows Turkey is being sucked into the violence in Syria, Patrick Cockburn, Independent)

And then there's this from the Front Page:

“Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s claim that “Turkey and AKP governments have never had any direct or indirect connection with any terrorist organization” flies in the face of last November’s report from the U.N. Security Council’s Analytical Support and Monitoring Team, which identifies Turkey as the primary route for weaponry smuggled to ISIL and the Al-Nusrah Front.

The State Department’s briefing at the beginning of June also stated Turkey is the main route for more than 22,000 fighters who have flocked to Syria to join extremist organizations, mainly ISIL. There are numerous other sources” (Turkey into the Abyss, Robert Ellis, Front Page)

Erdogan has pulled out all the stops in his attempt to consolidate his power and become Turkey’s supreme leader, which is why he’s trying to have pro-Kurdish members of parliament (HDP) stripped of immunity and prosecuted as criminals under Turkey’s stringent terrorism laws. (So far, more than 1,300 mostly Kurdish nationalist supporters and leftists have been swept up in a massive government dragnet since the bombing in Suruc two weeks ago. None of these people have yet been charged with a crime. The government has dropped all pretense that it is carrying out a war on ISIS. The roundup is clearly politically motivated.)

In an article that appeared in the Turkish daily, Hurriyet, statistician Emer Deliveli asks “Is Erdogan warmongering for political power?” Here’s what he says:

“After showing that “political stability indicators at an all-time low”, Deliveli says, “my analyses showed that, indeed, support for the AKP (Erdogan’s party) increased after episodes of rising political violence.”... “one cannot prove that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is warmongering for political power ... However, both conspiracy theories are in fact variants of the same theme—Erdogan doing all it takes to become an all-powerful president. And when evidence piles up like this, one cannot help but think, “what if.” (Is Erdogan warmongering for political power?, Hurriyet)

Erdogan wouldn’t be the first leader to start a war to boost his popularity at home, or the last. But it’s a risky strategy all the same, especially since his erratic and self-serving policies have already alienated a broad cross-section of the electorate that used to comprise his base. Check out this blurb from Foreign Policy magazine:

“Erdogan’s weakness in perceiving and acting on the militant Islamist threat has not won him extra friends on the security-first right. His autocratic Islamist style is losing him support on the left. And as for the Kurdish vote, well, he can just forget about it. History has also shown that seemingly invincible leaders can be forced to go gently — or not so gently — into that good night. The mighty Ottomans, after all, did not last forever. There’s no reason why a neo-Ottoman would either.” (The Sultan of Swing’s Dangerous Gamble, Leela Jacinto, Foreign Policy)

The biggest threat facing Erdogan in the short-term is that the Turkish people will see what he’s up to and cast their ballots accordingly in the November elections. But that will require restraint on the part of the Kurdish militias who will have to silence their guns to win the support of the people.

The only way the Kurds can beat a power-drunk, right-wing fanatic like Erdogan, is by giving peace a chance. Until the votes are counted, that is.