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Is Turkey Creeping Toward Civil War? Erdogan's Cynical Game

By Maximilian Popp and Christoph Reuter

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Turkish President Erdogan claims to be battling the terrorist Islamic State, but in reality he is mainly fighting against the Kurdish PKK militia. By doing so, he has shown that he is willing to derail the peace process in his country for the sake of clinging to power.

Newal Bulut grew up in war, and now she fears it could return. She is a 27-year-old graphic designer from the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey. Sometimes she asks herself whether that night in June, when the pro-Kurdish party HDP won seats in the Turkish parliament thanks in part to Turkish voters, was only a beautiful, ephemeral dream?

Bulut spent several nervous months with Selahattin Demirtas, the co-chairman of the HDP. She applauded at his speeches, and convinced friends and relatives to support the young party leader, who not only promised but also embodied change in Turkish politics. At school and later at university, Bulut saw how friends who had advocated for more rights for Kurds, were arrested as suspected terrorists. She hoped that the HDP's success in the June 7 election would help Turkey become a peaceful, pluralistic country.

Just two months later, Bulut walks through downtown Diyarbakir, wearing black leggings, dark nail polish and piercings. She strolls past armored police cars as fighter jets roar overhead. Anti-government protesters erected barricades and set cars on fire the night before. The words "Kobane is everywhere" and "Freedom for Öcalan" are spray-painted on walls. "I was naïve," says Bulut.

'This Is Only the Beginning'

The same ritual repeats itself night after night: At around 9 p.m., fighter jets take off from the military base outside the city to conduct air strikes against positions held by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in northern Iraq, and its offshoots in Syria. Only a few of the air strikes target Islamic State (IS) positions. At the same time, young Kurds are setting downtown Diyarbakir on fire. Where roadblocks are erected, the police respond with water guns and tear gas. But the protesters are not easily deterred. They chant: "This is only the beginning." In Istanbul and other cities, violent clashes with police have erupted, resulting in injuries and death.

The Kurdish Spring has turned into a hate-filled, violent summer. Many people in Diyarbakir believe that civil war is inevitable.

The peace process between the government and the Kurds has come to an end. Statements made this week by both Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and PKK leaders have confirmed as much. PKK fighters and Turkish soldiers are being killed almost daily by fighting, air strikes and attacks.

Last week, it seemed as if Erdogan would finally do what the West has long hoped he would, namely to take action against IS after years of tolerating the militant group.

After the devastating suicide bombing at a Kurdish youth rally on July 20 that left 32 dead in the town of Suruc, across the border from the Syrian Kurd enclave of Kobane, US President Barack

Obama spoke with his Turkish counterpart on the phone. Both sides agreed to join forces in the fight against IS, something the Turkish government had stubbornly resisted until then.

The US Air Force is now permitted to use multiple Turkish military bases as well as the NATO air base at Incirlik to stage its air strikes against IS militants -- access it did not have before. This dramatically reduces the distances US jets have to fly. Instead of taking off from their bases in the Persian Gulf and refueling mid-air, the planes now only have to travel 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Incirlik before reaching IS-controlled territory.

Last Friday morning, four days after the suicide bombing in Suruc -- which, incidentally, no one has claimed responsibility for yet -- the Turkish air force launched an attack on IS positions. "Three F-16 fighter jets took off at 3:12 a.m. from Diyarbakir Air Base and bombed three IS targets between 3:40 and 3:53 a.m.," the office of the prime minister announced several hours later.

A Cynical Excuse to Wage War?

But Erdogan's true intentions quickly became clear. He wanted to use the opportunity to fight what he and the other hardliners in his party felt was the greater evil: the PKK. This has created an absurd situation in which Turkey is now striking at both IS and its most effective and toughest opponents. Seen in this light, Turkey appears to be using the Suruc suicide bombing as nothing but a cynical excuse to wage war, not against IS, but against the terror organization's victims.

The Turkish fighter jets take off day and night to attack the PKK headquarters in the hard-to-reach Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq, as well as their positions in Turkey. Turkish tanks have also fired on fighters of a PKK offshoot in Syria who were near IS positions.

What has been happening in the past week in northern Iraq and Turkey in particular seems counterproductive. As more and more countries in the Middle East have descended into violence, the peace process between Turkey and the PKK that had materialized after years of tough negotiations was a rare glimmer of hope. Erdogan himself long seemed determined to end a civil war that had raged for two decades and left 40,000 dead, but in which neither side could claim victory. "We can no longer wait for a political solution," he said in a moving speech to the Turkish parliament in 2009. "The tears of the mothers of dead sons on both sides will not allow it."

But as paradoxical as Erdogan's current military strategy seems, considering what he said in 2009, it doesn't come as a surprise.

Erdogan has always treated politics as war. No other prominent Turkish politician is more ruthless than him. By attacking the PKK, he is fomenting the sort of turmoil that will likely pave the way for new elections in the fall.

Disconnected from Reality

In June, after 13 years in power, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, the AKP, lost its absolute majority in parliament and is now dependent on a coalition partner for the first time in its history. For Erdogan, the election result is a setback. He had hoped for a two-thirds majority, which he needs in order to amend the constitution to create a presidential system and cement his dominant position for years to come. But the Kurdish HDP thwarted his plan when it entered parliament.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had 45 days to form a coalition. The deadline is Aug. 23. Erdogan apparently wants people in Turkey to have the impression that only a one-party government dominated by the AKP can manage the chaos in the country. He wants the HDP to be labeled a party of terrorists, pushing it below the 10-percent hurdle required to secure seats in parliament in the next election. This is also supported by the fact that the Turkish judiciary in Diyarbakir on Thursday said that it is investigating Demirtas for allegedly "provoking and arming" protesters.

The question is whether this strategy can be convincing. Observers assume that Erdogan could draw voters from the far-right extremist MHP party to his AKP with his nationalistic agenda. HDP voters' loyalties appear to be unshaken even despite the recent tumult. Opinion polls show that only six percent of them would vote for another party should new elections be called.

The stalemate could last for months, but that's not enough of a reason for Erdogan to abandon his cynical game. It's entirely possible that the president is unaware of just how dangerous his game really is. After many years in power, he seems increasingly disconnected from reality. A military escalation could not simply be stopped with the push of a button come election day.

At the starting point of the current escalation, the border to Syria, nothing seems to be happening these days.

Along the eastern section of the border, the Turkish town of Karkamis faces the Syrian town of Jarabulus. On the Syrian side, a black-and-white Islamic State flag is visible, fluttering listlessly in the hot summer air. Directly adjacent, barely 100 meters (330 feet) away on the Turkish side, is the office of Erdogan's ruling AKP party. The border crossing is closed, but there are no tanks, no troops, not even a border patrol station -- nothing to indicate that Turkey's campaign against the jihadi terrorist army is about to begin.

Facilitating IS' Rise to Power

So far, the Turkish government has consistently denied supporting IS. But in the gray zone between active support and passively looking the other way, Erdogan's government has facilitated IS' rise to power.

Since the summer of 2012, when large numbers of foreign jihad recruits began flooding into Syria from Turkey, Turkish authorities have allowed them to enter and leave through provincial airports in the south. IS recruitment was long tolerated within Turkey, and members of IS were even allowed to use border crossings. It was only later, and little by little, that Ankara changed its stance.

In return for providing support to the international coalition against IS, the Turkish government has long called for the establishment of a "protective zone" in northern Syria, and now the Americans have agreed. It will extend about 100 kilometers from the border town of Azaz north of Aleppo to Jarabulus, and about 50 kilometers into Syria -- in the areas that IS still controls. The plan to drive the jihadists out of the region, other than with increased air attacks, has remained vague, except that rebels supported by the Americans and the Turks are to advance into the region. But which rebels, and how will they accomplish this?

According to the official goal of the anti-IS coalition, the protective zone is intended to help cut off IS' supply lines and smuggling routes. But the Turkish government apparently has a different goal in mind: to prevent the Kurds from capturing and controlling a cohesive region along its border.

The People's Protection Units, or YPG, as the PKK offshoot in Syria is called, have captured large amounts of territory from IS in recent weeks -- to Ankara's horror and Washington's delight. In mid-June, the Kurds managed to capture the Syrian border town of Tal Abyad, and before long they were only 30 kilometers from the unofficial IS capital of Raqqa.

Erdogan Fears Kurdish State

In doing so, the YPG was able to create a corridor between two of the three previously isolated Kurdish "cantons" in northern Syria. If the militia, together with other rebels, could now drive IS away from the border entirely, all of the "cantons" would be connected. Erdogan was already threatening war after the capture of Tal Abyad. "Under no circumstances will we permit the establishment of a new state in northern Syria." He was referring to a Kurdish state.

Media organizations aligned with the government reported that 18,000 Turkish troops were being mobilized to invade the region that now encompasses the "protective zone." On June 29, the Arab-language newspaper *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, published in London, predicted that Erdogan and his prime minister would "push for a Turkish intervention, especially in the region of Jarabulus, to prevent Kurdish forces from advancing any farther -- under the pretense of fighting IS." Now, only one month later, at least part of this prediction has come true. Although Turkish ground troops are not involved yet, it cannot be ruled out that this will happen soon.

If the Turkish army does in fact march into Syria, "we will consider this an invasion and defend ourselves," the leader of the political arm of the YPG, Salih Muslim, warned in a conversation with SPIEGEL. Otherwise, however, he is trying to deescalate the conflict. "We do not want conflict with Turkey. If Ankara wants IS to be driven out, we can do this together with other local groups, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds. Instead, the AKP has slammed the door shut and is trying to weaken the Kurds, who are fighting IS."

However, there is currently no indication that Turkey will deploy ground troops. Even at a secret meeting of several Syrian rebel commanders in Ankara early last week, there was only talk of more support, but not of an impending invasion. Apparently a direct confrontation with YPG was also not on the table. Still, skepticism prevailed among the participants, including a leader of the Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham. "The Turks have already promised us twice to create a protective

zone in the north, but nothing ever came of it," says one of the rebel leaders. "If they help us against (Syrian President) Bashar Assad or IS, okay. Otherwise we will continue fighting on our own."

US Intensifies Cooperation with Turkey

While the European NATO partners, especially the German government, criticize the Turks for their attacks on the PKK, the Americans apparently view the situation differently. For them, it is more important that the Turks, after years of unsuccessful attempts to win them over, are finally willing to help in the fight against IS.

"We look forward to intensifying cooperation with Turkey and all of our partners in the global fight against ISIL," tweeted Brett McGurk, US President Barack Obama's deputy special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, while ignoring the fact that two of these partners are currently declaring war on each other. A possible escalation, McGurk hastened to add, would certainly not be the fault of the United States. "There is no connection between these air strikes against PKK and recent understandings to intensify US-Turkey cooperation against ISIL," he added.

The US State Department declared that while PKK is a terrorist organization, improved cooperation with Turkey would now make it possible to offer the Syrian group YPG improved air support. In doing so, it created a separation between the two closely cooperating organizations, a distinction that apparently only exists in the minds of Washington politicians.

It is a bitter irony of history that Erdogan, as president, is now waging war against the PKK, even though, as prime minister, he did more for the Kurds than any previous Turkish politician. In 2005, he was one of the first to publicly state that there was a "Kurdish problem" that needed to be resolved democratically. Before then, the Turkish state had long refused to even recognize the Kurds' existence. Erdogan granted the country's largest minority greater autonomy and invested billions of euros in the infrastructure in southeastern Turkey. He relaxed a ban on the use of the Kurdish language and permitted Kurdish radio and TV stations. In 2012, Turkish intelligence began peace negotiations with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned on Imrali Island in the Sea of Marmara since his arrest in 1999.

But it was precisely because of this policy of détente, for which Erdogan was widely praised, that he lost something that had been extremely useful to the Turkish leader in his efforts to retain power: the external enemy, against which Turkish voters could be stirred up for decades, and also disciplined. A climate of détente took hold, and new political movements developed, such as the protest movement against the destruction of Gezi Park in Istanbul and the arrogance of those in power.

Erdogan repeatedly tried to create new enemies with his tirades against foreign conspiracies. He conjured up conspiracies against Turkey by supporters of influential exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, the "interest rate mafia" and the German airline Lufthansa. Erdogan "controls the hatred or the fear of the lower class," Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran wrote in the magazine *Zenith*, describing the autocratic ruler's manipulation of popular resentments. But these new efforts to

create a bogeyman were not overly successful. After all, how much outrage could an "interest rate mafia" generate compared to a guerilla organization?

The PKK's Role

The PKK has also contributed to the escalation. Its fighters have reportedly committed a series of attacks in recent days. Last Sunday, PKK militants killed two officers in the town of Lice and injured four other soldiers in an attack on their military vehicle. In Diyarbakir, militants fired on a tearoom in Diyarbakir, killing a police officer and a civilian. Three soldiers were killed in an attack in Sirnak Province on Thursday.

This is only the beginning, threatens Murat Bektas, saying that his organization will plan further attacks if the Turkish government does not stop its strikes. Bektas heads the YDG-H, in Diyarbakir, a youth organization aligned with the PKK. And it is angry young men like him who are promoting the escalation.

Bektas has learned to build barricades and use weapons. "I am armed for this battle," he says. He is considered influential within the movement, because the PKK depends on the young, dedicated members of the YDG-H. Bektas is slim, dressed in jeans and a baggy shirt, sports a three-day beard and has a wrinkled forehead. He has been living in the underground for the last five years and, together with other activists, remains hidden in a concrete building on the outskirts of Diyarbakir. He does not reveal his real name.

The noise of a busy street can be heard through a window, there is a portrait of Öcalan on the wall, and a Kurdish newspaper lies on the table in front of him. The headline on the front page reads: "The AKP Has the Blood of Our Children on its Hands."

'We Are Prepared for the Worst'

Many members and supporters of the PKK never believed in the peace process, says Bektas. Because Öcalan was pushing for peace, he explains, his supporters obeyed his orders to promote peace. But the Turkish military's advances against PKK now show that the government is uninterested in peace with the Kurds, Bektas adds, which is why the group is determined to renew the struggle.

Many citizens in Diyarbakir and other cities in the region have already armed themselves with knives, pistols and machine guns, says Bektas. "We are prepared for the worst."

Moderate forces have fallen behind within both the PKK and the Turkish government, as the agitators have taken over. HDP leader Demirtas has sought to deescalate the conflict in recent days, but his messages hardly make an impression on the radicalized youth anymore.

"Even more blood will be shed," warns Mehmet Öcalan, the brother of the PKK leader, in a telephone conversation with SPIEGEL. "Abdullah is the only one who can stop the catastrophe at this point." But Öcalan is cut off from current events at the prison on Imrali Island. The government has not allowed anyone to visit him since April.

Talks between the Turkish government and the PKK have repeatedly been on the brink of failure in recent years. Nevertheless, as recently as February Öcalan issued a statement calling upon his supporters to finally renounce violence. The rebel leader called it a "historic decision."

Half a year later, his words no longer apply.