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Politico-Psychological Analysis of the Recent Terrorist Attacks in Turkey: An Insider's View

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Introduction

Since the 19th century Ottoman era and stretching to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkish foreign policy has had a Western vocation and a diplomatic tradition influenced by Western values. Due to the psychological impact of World War I and its aftermath, the founders of the Republic contemplated that for the survival of the state, it was essential to be part of the European zone of peace and liberal values and to define a new national identity that was not in conflict with these values. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, where some of the European powers were entangled, was cautious: In the interwar period, it sought alliances and non-aggression pacts. During the Cold War, it chose to stay away from regional conflicts and had defined its bilateral relations according to its economic and energy interests.

The 1990-1991 Gulf War and what followed forced Ankara to change its policy of caution and to adopt a more active policy to prevent an increase in terrorist attacks along its southern borders resulting from the instability in the region. Turkey has been suffering from separatist terrorism since the early 1980s. At that time, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) carried out terrorist attacks that claimed tens of thousands of Turkish military and civilian lives, including Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin. While the conflict generally eased after 1999, when PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured, it resumed after the 2003 Iraq War. The war left a divided Iraq that, after the US withdrawal in 2011, became a fertile ground to raise terrorists and suicide attackers out of a hopeless, young generation. In a broader sense, a disaffected population could be convinced of a narrative of "suffering" and "social discrimination" and easily mobilized to action on the basis of ethnicity or religion, like in Iraq, or elsewhere with a significant migrant population or a minority. The resulting religious extremism gave rise to the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL or its Arabic acronym *Daesh*). The group took war to its barbaric form and demolished anything they deemed "the other" or, more precisely, that did not fit their definition of Islam.

At the same time, Turkey found itself facing the crisis in Syria. The protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Asad in Syria starting in 2011 devolved into a civil war that included the use

MES Notes

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of chemical weapons. Russia was mainly interested in keeping Asad in power to maintain its critical bases in Syria along the Eastern Mediterranean. The United States, on the other hand, was wary of another military intervention in the region, and thus, military intervention in Syria was not even an option for the Obama administration. The mounting atrocities caused a massive flow of refugees into Turkey.

The large influx of people and the continued hostilities created a huge problem for border security in the land and maritime domain as well as significant national security challenges for Turkey. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian arm of the PKK, emerged as a powerful group in the conflict in Syria. To fight ISIL, the “train and equip” program to set up a mainly Sunni Arab Syrian rebel force failed and ended.¹ Hence, the PYD, emerged as a powerful group out of the conflict in Syria. The fight between ISIL and the PYD over strategic lands to consolidate their power spread to Turkish territory with ISIL attacks against Kurds.

This piece will cover terrorist attacks carried out by both the PKK and ISIL in Turkey over a one-year time span (July 2015–July 2016), provide a politico-psychological analysis to assess the impact of these attacks, and present an insider’s view.

Chronology of events:

- 20 July 2015: ISIL attack against the Socialist Youth Associations Federation—a group affiliated with the Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP)—during a public statement on the Qobani siege, killing 34 people in Suruç in southeastern Turkey.
- 10 October 2015: Twin suicide attacks by ISIL against groups including HDP and trade unions in Ankara, killing 95 people.
- 12 January 2016 and 19 March 2016: ISIL attacks in Sultanahmet Square and Taksim Square—popular tourist attractions of Istanbul—killing 16 tourists.
- 17 February 2016: Suicide attack carried out by a group affiliated with the PKK against the Turkish military and civilian personnel of the Turkish Armed Forces, killing 29 people.
- 13 March 2016: Suicide attack carried out by the PKK at the city center (Kızılay) of Ankara, killing 38 people
- 7 June 2016: Suicide attack by the PKK against police forces in Istanbul, killing 12 people.
- 28 July 2016: ISIL attack involving Kalashnikov rifles and a suicide attack at Istanbul’s Atatürk airport, killing 45 people.

The attacks in Kızılay and Atatürk Airport were different from, and more impactful than, the previous ones since they were not directed against a certain profession or group, but rather they directly targeted ordinary citizens or tourists travelling to Turkey. The brutality of the attacks and their locations deserve an analysis to assess the psychological impact.

Analysis

Turkey, having fought against separatist terrorism for three decades, is now witnessing Islamist extremist terrorist attacks in its territory against its citizens, values, and identity. These dual threats are exacerbated by the lack of shared vision between Turkey and its allies regarding Syria and Bashar al-Asad’s future and the role assigned to PYD in the fight. In fact, both sources of threat, ISIL and PYD, are fighting with each other over the control of the corridor lying along Turkey’s southern border. What complicated the picture was the image conveyed by Ankara as a firm standing for the overthrow of Asad, hence a possible support to groups against his regime. Turkish foreign policy towards Syria was shortsighted at best. The regional consequences became unbearable, with the refugee crisis

MES Notes (Cont)

26 May 2016

Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled “Metamorphosis in Counterterrorism” at the Turkish War Colleges’ “International Relations and Security Symposium”, Istanbul, Turkey.

22 June 2016

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “ISIL in Historical, Theoretical and Strategic Contexts” at the Sixth International Neighbourhood Symposium, Yesilkoy, Turkey.

13 July 2016

Amin Tarzi presented a talk entitled “Origins and Aims of ISIL and Strategies to Counter it” to the staff of Thomson Reuters Special Services, LLC, Mclean, VA.

leading to a porous border, paving way the way for ISIL and PKK infiltration.

In 2014, the Turkish government officially launched the “Resolution Process” or the “Peace Process” (as the HDP referred to it) to end the armed conflict with the slogan to “end the tears of mothers,” referring to the funerals that sparked outrage on both sides.² While the goal was clear, that is to end PKK terrorism, the end state and other details were vague for the public and the political parties alike: It was unclear whether the PKK would be disarmed totally and what would be a viable political solution. There were also some mixed messages for the constituencies. While Turks, long suffering from the PKK terrorist attacks, called for the cessation of the attacks in return for granting cultural and civil rights, Kurdish political groups heightened the expectation for eventual autonomy.³ For PKK’s armed branch based in the Qandil Mountain (in Northern Iraq), disarming would mean a total defeat for the PKK and would end the influence of their discourse if they chose unarmed political participation. Nevertheless, the cessation of terrorist attacks and the prospect of a peaceful debate of the issue were received well by the public.

The 7 June 2015 elections in Turkey were a turning point for all the political parties represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM-the Turkish Parliament). The HDP received 13 percent of the vote (going over the 10 percent threshold) and won more seats than the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Together, opposition parties had a chance to form a coalition government, but they could not overcome their differences. After the June election, the PKK resumed its attacks in some provinces in southeastern Turkey; however, this time its targets went beyond military units to include civilians in what is referred to as a “*hendek* (trench) war.” In the subsequent elections in November, HDP lost a lot of ground, but still prevailed over the election threshold.

As retaliation for its losses in the trench war, the PKK orchestrated the impactful attack in Ankara. The attacks were carried out literally in the heart of the city, where the residents have felt the most secure. The 17 February 2016 attack targeted a bus carrying military and civilian personnel leaving work during rush hour. The location of the attack was on Merasim Street, in the middle of the headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces and the residences of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) personnel. The sound of the explosion could be heard in the Çankaya district, host to the foreign missions and state protocol. This increased the psychological impact by signaling that the terrorists could get close to the most secure neighborhoods of the Turkish capital city.

The Atatürk Boulevard, or the “Protocol Road,” starts from *Çankaya Köşkü* (Çankaya Mansion)—which has been the Presidential Residence until 2014—goes down the hill, touches embassy compounds along each side, runs by the TBMM, and reaches the military headquarters and the office of the Prime Minister. It is one of the main routes of a typical Ankara resident. If the road is followed down to the city center (Kızılay) we reach the main transportation hub, Güvenpark, where the riot police are on duty. The PKK’s March attack hit Güvenpark.

13 March 2016 was an exceptionally sunny day in Ankara with a clear sky, offering a relaxing day out for residents. After a great day with family, I was enjoying the evening. Suddenly, at 18:30 I heard a loud sound that eventually proved to be that of an explosion near Güvenpark. It came as a shock and left the deepest psychological impact not only on Ankara residents, but also on the country as a whole, as the attack targeted the ordinary citizen. The immediate reaction was resentment for not “deserving” such a horrendous attack. Their sense of personal or communal “border” or “buffer” with unsettled countries was violated, and they felt that their lives and life-styles were threatened like the people on the other side of “this border.”

The reaction has much to do with national self-perception and national identity as a result of World War I. After the war, Turkey strove to become equal to contemporary civilizations, especially Western civilization. Turkish leaders believed that if Turkey had stayed “backward” or like a post-colonial state, it would sooner or later be partitioned by Great Powers—a trauma left by the 1920 Sèvres Treaty that foresaw the partitioning of Anatolia among the victorious powers of World War I and did not recognize an independent state for Turks. The resulting social identity, thus, was as superior to the Middle East, but inferior to the West. Hence, to overcome this inferiority complex, Turkey introduced many changes: a new legal system, abolishment of the caliphate and the sultanate, and a new alphabet, dress code, and civil law in accordance with Western values. At the core of this social construction lay the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, whose name was given to the Istanbul airport, an international hub. Thus, the attack by ISIL at Atatürk Airport and the way it was carried out left a deep impact on the Turkish people, just like the attacks in Ankara.

The discourse of religious extremism that could appeal to the devoted religious communities is “social discrimination” or “sense of inferiority” of Muslims in non-Muslim societies. One of the reasons that Turkey has become the scene of ISIL attacks is its ability to overcome this feeling of discrimination with its secular system and European Union prospects. Terrorism targets moderates and moderation and mobilizes disaffected populations through the propaganda of “suffering.”

Conclusion

With the problems in the region continuing, Turkey continues to face challenges inherent to being a recipient state of fleeing refugees. There is already a growing resentment toward Syrian refugees due to differences in culture, gender biases, family values, and reproduction rates. If the Syrian refugees are granted citizenship, the Turks fear that their wages will go down. Coupled with the Syrian refugee issue and the debate on granting them citizenship are new concerns over a new “minority rights problem” with demands on territory, particularly, Hatay. The Southeastern part of Turkey hosts oil and shale gas fields, as well as two pipelines that end in terminals within and close to Hatay. The region is also rich in water resources and agricultural land suitable for organic farming. Additionally, Turkey and its ally in Washington remain at odds over the PYD. Washington supports the PYD openly and formally, as it is the most important local power fighting ISIL; Ankara sees the PYD as a terrorist organization because of its ties with the PKK. As a result, the fears and threat perceptions of Turkey regarding the Kurdish issue remain unchanged: the division of the country as a spillover effect of an independent Kurdish state in its southern border.

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Notes:

¹ Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html?_r=0.

² Terörün Sona Erdilmesi ve Toplumsal Bütünleşmenin Güçlendirilmesine Dair Kanun (The Law on the Cessation of Terror and Strengthening Social Integration), *Official Gazzette*, 16 July, 2014, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2014/07/20140716-1.htm>.

³ “DTK’dan ‘öz yönetim’ Deklarasyonu! (The Declaration on Self Rule by the DTK),” *Milliyet*, December 27, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/dtk-sonuc-bildirgesinde-gundem-2170231/>.

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