

BULLETIN

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The Escalation of Conflict Between the Kurdistan Workers Party and Turkish Authorities

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In response to terrorist attacks carried out by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Turkish authorities have adopted a new strategy to fight terrorism in which the main goal is to eliminate all the military bases of the PKK outside Turkish territory. This policy, however, will not lead to a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey and can cause additional tensions in the Middle East. Therefore, the European Union should encourage the Turkish authorities to take into account some of the Kurds' demands.

The Kurds inhabit the southeastern part of Turkey as well as parts of the territories of Iran, Iraq and Syria. For more than a hundred years, the Turkish authorities have been denying the existence of a Kurdish nation and violently fighting the Kurdish national movement. One of the main organizations that fights for the rights of Kurds, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), was founded in 1978 and has a radical leftist ideology. It calls for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan on lands inhabited mostly by people of Kurdish origin. At the beginning of the '90s, the PKK sought to accomplish this task by using military bases in northern Iraq to stage attacks on Turkey. As a result of the fighting between the PKK and Turkey, about 40,000 people have been killed on both sides. The methods adopted by the PKK, including bombings that had civilian victims, led to it being listed as a terrorist organization, not only by Turkey but also by the European Union and the United States.

Attempts to Resolve the Kurdish Conflict. A chance to end the Kurdish–Turkish conflict appeared in 2000. The PKK declared a formal end of the war against Turkey and announced that it would renounce terrorism. Two years later, the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. During its first term, the AKP took on a number of reforms that improved the situation of the Kurds: legalized television and radio broadcasts in Kurdish and allowed them to take part in private Kurdish courses. The AKP also improved the living conditions of the Kurds. The motivation for the AKP to carry out these reforms was, on one hand, because of the need to adapt Turkish law to EU standards and, on the other, the desire to win the support of Kurds in the parliamentary elections. In carrying out this second task, the AKP has achieved great success. The popularity of the AKP in the areas inhabited by the Kurds has grown. In the parliamentary elections in 2007, the AKP won as many as 41% of the votes in Diyarbakir, which is the unofficial capital city of Kurdistan. However, the moderate position taken by the AKP has not led to a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. The reforms carried out by the ruling party were found to be insufficient by the PKK's members who were concerned by the growing support of the AKP in regions dominated by Kurds. As a result, between 2005 and 2007, the PKK intensified its terrorist attacks, to which the Turkish army responded in 2007 and 2008 with air and land offensives on the military bases of the PKK in Iraq.

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once again made an attempt to solve the Kurdish problem in 2009. The first 24-hour television channel in Kurdish was launched and the government presented a reform plan aimed at enhancing the rights of the Kurds. Soon, however, the Turkish authorities abandoned the introduction of these reforms, fearing an increase in claims by Kurds and the loss of part of their electorate. They also limited the activities of the parties that represented

the interests of the Kurdish community. In December 2009, after charges of cooperating with the PKK were levelled against the only legal group that represented the Kurdish community in the Turkish parliament, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the Constitutional Court banned the party. In response, the PKK conducted attacks that killed many Turkish soldiers and civilians. The period of increased violence ended only with a ceasefire announcement by the PKK in August 2010, which was then cancelled at the end of February 2011.

The next chance to solve the Kurdish problem appeared soon after the parliamentary elections in 2011, in which, for the third time in a row, the AKP party won. Prime Minister Erdoğan announced that he would prepare a new, more democratic constitution, increasing individual freedom. However, a boycott of parliament made it difficult to work on the proposals. The boycott was led by 30 independent Kurdish activists associated with the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and gathered from the remnants of the DTP in protest of the arrest of six members on the suspicion that they belonged to an illegal organization (the PKK). Moreover Kurdish activists prepared a declaration of democratic autonomy for Kurdistan and demanded the country designate several independent regions. At the same time, the PKK continued its terrorist attacks. In response, Turkish authorities adopted a new strategy in mid-August 2011 to fight terrorism with the main aim the eradication of all the PKK's military bases in Iraq. The first airstrikes in northern Iraq were conducted on 17 August 2011. According to the Turkish army, in six days of bombing about a hundred members of the Kurdish organization were killed, although Kurdish sources denied these reports.

Perspectives. It can be assumed that Turkish military measures alone will not solve the problem. This is evidenced by the PKK's reaction, which involved carrying out further terrorist attacks in Turkey. Victims included not only Turkish soldiers but also civilians (including Kurds). It cannot be excluded that the PKK was expecting the Turkish authorities to react as they did, because an increase in tensions in the country brings the PKK new fans. It is also possible that in the fight against the PKK the Turkish authorities could carry out a land operation in northern Iraq. However, if such an operation were to go forward, the Turkish authorities would not be able to count on the military support of the Kurdish autonomous government in northern Iraq. The Kurdish representatives there oppose any intervention by Turkey on the territory of Iraq. In the fight against the PKK, the Turkish authorities may rely, however, on diplomatic and intelligence support from the United States. The U.S. administration will support Turkey in the region because it is treating Turkey as a regulator of democratic transition and stabilization in North Africa and the Middle East.

It seems unlikely that a new constitution will bring a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Taking into account some of the demands of the BDP party (including the establishment of Kurdish autonomy) and the present composition of parliament, this seems to be impossible. Both the AKP, which represents the majority party in the Turkish parliament, and some right-wing parties are not interested in expanding the rights of the Kurds. Any concessions by the Turkish government on the Kurdish issue provokes a negative reaction from the Turkish public, who fear that such a policy would lead *de facto* to the division of Turkey and the secession of Kurdish areas. Also, some Kurds are against giving in to some of the demands of the BDP. They are critical of the BDP because of its conservative philosophy and commitment to Islam. Others reject the party's program because they have assimilated and are strongly associated with Turkey.

Recommendation. The European Union should encourage the Turkish authorities to take into account some of the Kurds' demands, such as reducing the parliamentary electoral threshold and allowing the Kurdish language in public educational institutions. Ethnic tensions would be reduced by rapid economic development in Turkey's pauperized eastern regions, which are inhabited by Kurds, as well as further improvements in access to education. At the same time, the EU should support Turkey in its fight against PKK terrorism and share information about its activities. There is a high probability that in the struggle for the independence of the Kurds, the PKK members may carry out terrorist attacks on the territory of EU countries, especially in Germany where many of their supporters are living. The formation of an independent Kurdish state in which the PKK would play a key role brings with it the danger of the destabilization of not only Turkey but the entire region (Syria, Iraq and Iran), which in the current socio-political situation in North Africa and the Middle East is not a desirable scenario for the EU or its member states.