



Despite ISIS attacks, Turkey focused on ‘the Kurdish problem’

Turkish officials accused of conflating 2 domestic security issues

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A number of audacious attacks in Turkey, including a major bombing in Istanbul's tourist district last week, have shown that the country cannot escape the wrath of ISIS.

But analysts say that rather than focusing on the threat posed by the jihadi militants, the Turkish government has been using it as a political lever to continue to demonize Kurdish separatists.

"One of the bigger threats to Turkey right now is ISIS, and people coming in from Syria, but the Turkish government is so focused on the Kurdish problem," says Emma Ashford, a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., with an expertise in international security.

"I think that's in large part because [blaming the Kurds] is very popular at home. And so the government has a real incentive to do that, but it means that they're pretty much ignoring the big problem."

The tense relationship between Turkey and its Kurdish minority goes back many years. Since the 1980s, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) has fought an armed struggle with the Turkish government over Kurdish self-determination.

But since 2011, Turkey has also been a front-line witness to the Syrian civil war, which has been buzzing on Turkey's southern flank and led to the influx of millions of refugees.

Western powers, and the U.S. especially, have been warning for years that Turkey needs to tighten its borders to restrict the movement of fighters to and from the Islamic State, which is headquartered in Raqqa, Syria.

In the last year, those concerns appear to have been borne out inside Turkey.

ISIS hasn't been 'pursued aggressively'

In July, an ISIS suicide bomber struck a cultural centre in Suruc, near the Turkish-Syrian border, killing 33 people.

An ISIS bombing of a peace rally in the capital, Ankara, in October killed more than 100 people — the largest attack ever on Turkish soil.

Last week, 10 people died after an ISIS agent blew himself up in Istanbul.

The presence of ISIS in Turkey is largely a result of the country's policy towards the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, says Robert W. Pearson, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey.

As a result of its hatred of Assad, Turkey has "resorted to allowing anyone who would fight Assad, no matter how extreme their views were, to get into the area to join the fight."

And so between 2013 and the first half of 2015, ISIS agents were able "to build up logistics networks, cells and all those kind of things you can do [inside Turkey] if you aren't being pursued aggressively," Pearson says.

Conflating problems

The fact that the Sunni group has targeted Turkey's most populous cities would seem to demonstrate its intent to destabilize the country.

But Ashford says that any time there is an attack of any sort in Turkey, the government name-drops the PKK, the acronym for the Kurdish Workers Party.

"We've seen this pattern with several attacks, including the one [on Jan. 12], that were almost definitely the work of ISIS, and the government has been either attributing them to the PKK or more often implying they're related to the PKK or giving speeches where they conflate the two problems," says Ashford.

After the Oct. 10 bombings in Ankara, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Syrian intelligence and Kurdish militants, not just ISIS, were behind the attack.

Ashford says she hasn't seen any evidence of collaboration between Kurds and members of ISIS.

Nor has Pearson, who says such co-operation seems unfathomable given that the Ankara bombing targeted a peace rally in support of Kurdish rights, and that Kurdish fighters are in a pitched battle with ISIS in a number of Iraqi and Syrian towns south of the border.

A history of tension

Kurds, who are ethnically distinct from Turks, claim ancestral territory on the southeastern edge of the Anatolia region and would like to form a separate state.

Since the 1980s, PKK has carried out kidnappings, assassinations and suicide bombings. More than 40,000 people have died in the fight over Kurdish independence, according to the BBC.

In 2013, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan called a ceasefire with the government, and it looked like the two sides had reached détente.

However, observers say Turkey's growing involvement in Syria has complicated the situation. When Turkey formally joined the coalition fight in Syria in 2015, it was under the pretense of rolling back the Islamic State and further aiding rebels looking to unseat Assad.

Before long, reports emerged that many Turkish airstrikes in Syria had actually hit Kurdish ground forces, who are widely regarded as being among the most effective fighters in the anti-ISIS coalition.

ISIS has a very large presence up against the Turkish border that Turkey would very much like to dislodge. But Turkey also has other objectives, which include preventing "a contiguous Kurdish territory from establishing itself on the border with Turkey," says Reva Bhalla, vice-president of global analysis for Texas-based geopolitical intelligence firm Stratfor.

'Turning point' or not?

Pearson believes that the recent attack in Istanbul represents a "turning point" that could lead to a greater emphasis by Turkey on the ISIS threat.

Ashford is skeptical.

"I don't see the government changing course on the Kurdish issues," says Ashford.

In fact, she sees that a continuance of the demonizing of Kurdish militants and the relative passivity towards ISIS could result in increased, but separate, violence from both groups.

"I think the Turkish government is in a difficult place, but I don't think they're making good decisions."