

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

## **Terrorism: Turkey at the crossroads**

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Turkey has been fighting terrorists of various stripes for the past quarter of a century. Until now, the strategy has been to defeat the terrorists by military means. Today, for a set of interconnected internal and external reasons, almost all sectors of Turkish society and polity are aware of the need to develop a comprehensive strategy to overcome not just the terrorists, but the root causes and sources of terrorism. Whether Turkey will make timely and wise use of this window of opportunity or not is a highly critical question.

Terrorism is, of course, not the only vital issue facing Turkey today. Currently confronting Turkey are several crossroads, all entailing crucial choices, all with long-lasting consequences for the texture of Turkish society's future. The most fundamental one is whether Turkey is going to remain a secular democracy or move in a non-secular direction. The currently debated headscarf issue and the matter of a new constitution for Turkey are constituent elements of this core secular vs. anti-secular paradigm. Another is the future domain of Turkey in the global political setting. Is Turkey going to be part of the West, a European Union member, a steady force in the Euro-Atlantic community, a progressive country and a source of security and stability in its volatile neighborhood? Or is it going to be a country in search of a new identity, at odds with the West and an ordinary regional power with limited influence? Still another crossroad for Turkey is how it is going to handle the process of globalization in economic, environmental and social terms. The choice is likely to be between an actual and sound economy -- that is environment-friendly and respects the value and integrity of the individual -- and a virtual economy, heavily dependent on external variables and vulnerable to outside influence, that pays little attention to the environment and does not put the individual at the center of its activities. These are all critical choices for Turkey, each with the capacity to influence the country's future, each intimately connected to the rest. These issues are questions for other articles. Here, the subject is terrorism.

Turkey is a country that is unfortunately all too familiar with the scourge of terrorism. For more than two decades now, Turkey has been fighting terrorists spreading across a broad spectrum of ideological, ethnic, religious and chauvinist groupings. The cost in terms of human lives and material resources has been high, with some 40,000 lives lost, many people maimed for life and more than \$100 billion of resources spent in the effort. The side effects of terrorism have been equally horrendous. Terrorists have prevented investments in Turkey's Southeast, burned down schools and health centers, killed and intimidated public servants -- including more than 100 elementary school teachers murdered before the eyes of their students -- to prevent them from delivering services. They have effectively denied a sense of well-being and security to the people living in those areas, forcing many to leave their homes and migrate to other locations. Terrorism acts like a black hole, sapping much of Turkey's political, economic and creative energies.

The terrorist threat has long continued, with various terrorist organizations adapting their objectives to shifts in domestic and international circumstances, changing their

strategies and tactics -- even their names -- over time. Though there are other, lesser terrorist organizations, the primary threat to Turkey has been and is still the separatist/secessionist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Over the years, different factors have compounded the PKK problem and made it more intractable. Among external factors, the most serious has been the lack of adequate international cooperation. The PKK has received both overt and covert support and sustenance, including financial, logistical, political and other forms of assistance, from Turkey's neighbors and from countries in Europe and the Middle East. Today the PKK commits its terrorist attacks in Turkey operating from safe havens in Iraq. Turkey's EU accession process inadvertently exacerbated the problem of PKK terrorism because many EU member-states perceived the PKK as an extension of the "Kurdish issue" in Turkey. This perception, overlooking the distinction between the means and methods used by the terrorists and their self-acclaimed political objectives, kept many EU member states from taking effective measures against front organizations of the PKK operating above ground under various guises in their countries.

Domestically, Turkish governments in general treated terrorism primarily as a public order and security issue and based their combat strategy on mostly military foundations. In a sense, the government had relegated the problem to the military and security forces. The assumption was that with sufficient military force, the terrorists could be overcome. This strategy was successful to some degree due to the commitment and skills of the Turkish military and security forces. However, it proved not to be enough to put an end to the threat of terrorism, with the PKK continuing its attacks, depending on the prevailing conditions, with sometimes less, other times more frequency and intensity. Whatever limited socio-economic measures were taken were not effective. None of the numerous reports on the issues of the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey prepared by government officials starting in the early years of the republic -- and in later years by different political parties and groups -- made a lasting imprint.

#### The window of opportunity

There is today a qualitatively new state of affairs both inside and outside of Turkey regarding PKK terror, on the one hand, and the "Kurdish issue," on the other. There is at present a window of opportunity for Turkey to resolve both problems in a lasting manner.

Among the favorable developments at the international level, the most consequential is the change of attitude on the part of the US concerning the PKK's presence and activities in Iraq. After his meeting with the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the White House last November, President George W. Bush declared the PKK "an enemy of Turkey, an enemy of Iraq and an enemy of the US." Moreover, the US agreed to provide "actionable intelligence" to Turkey about PKK facilities, encampments and movements in northern Iraq. This paved the way for the recent cross-border operations by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) against the PKK in Iraq.

There has been a similarly important change of attitude in Europe. Finally, at last, informed European opinion makers are slowly starting to distinguish between PKK terror, which they condemn, and the "Kurdish issue," the resolution of which they still raise as a condition for Turkey's accession to the EU. The critical point here is that at

least some Europeans no longer view the PKK as an extension or product of what they term the "Kurdish issue."

There are also changes in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. Iran, even if for only circumstantial reasons, is taking a stance against the PKK and fighting its own version, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) both at home as well as in Iraq. The Iraqi Government and the Kurdish regional authorities in the north of the country, where the PKK is located, have also adopted a more receptive and understanding attitude toward Turkey's legitimate security needs and expectations.

These external developments coincide with parallel changes in the domestic scene. The terrorist attacks in recent months, particularly the last one in Diyarbakır, where among the victims there were several young students, have increased the aversion and disgust felt by the public toward the PKK. Even among its own sympathizers, the PKK seems to have lost ground.

The entry of the Democratic Society Party (DTP), a political party espousing Kurdish views, into the Parliament following the July elections last year, changed the equation for the PKK. The DTP in a sense stole the limelight from the PKK, forcing the PKK into extreme attacks in recent months to keep the attention focused on it. Though the DTP's refusal to condemn the PKK as a terrorist organization certainly limits its appeal and effectiveness, its presence in Parliament is still valuable. The DTP, now facing the possibility of closure by the Constitutional Court, must stop acting as the political branch of the PKK, condemn terrorism and offer feasible solutions if it wants to play a positive role within the avenues offered by Turkey's democracy.

There is also a growing recognition of the fact that military means and measures alone are not enough to counter terrorism. This realization is now shared not just by politicians and civil society in Turkey, but also by high-ranking generals in the armed forces, both retired and on active duty, who admit to the shortcomings of past strategies to combat terrorism. Thus, there is a qualitatively new awareness in Turkey, in both civil and official society, about the need for the adoption of different policies to eradicate the possible sources of terrorism while militarily combating the terrorists. Turkish government officials are nowadays hammering the point that combating terrorism is not only a security issue with a military dimension, but a complex problem with political, legal, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural and other aspects.

All these outside and inside factors converge and coalesce into what might best be termed as a window of opportunity for Turkey to reduce terrorist activity to manageably low levels while at the same time providing long term solutions to the web of problems associated with the Kurds.

The question is whether Turkey is going to be able to seize the window of opportunity created by this positive configuration of domestic and foreign conditions in its fight against terrorism. The armed combat against the PKK and all other terrorists by the Turkish military and the security forces will and must continue until the terrorists unequivocally denounce terrorism, lay down their arms and deliver themselves into the hands of justice.

However, the ultimate defeat of terrorism depends on Turkey's success in finding answers to the various dimensions of the issues raised by the Kurds and all those

economic, social and cultural fault lines that generate alienation and a sense of being left out by the different groups in society. This requires a renewed social contract, an integrated vision reflecting the contributions, views and expectations of the full spectrum of Turkish society. The mechanism for reaching such a contract would be the presentation, explanation and discussion of an appropriate strategy and action plan by the government to the public. The government's draft should include the contributions of the different institutions of the state apparatus. The public, universities and civil society organizations would discuss this draft and enrich it as appropriate. The discussion meetings should allow the largest participation possible and they should be transparent and encompass the entire population. The revised draft strategy would then go to Parliament. The aim of the debate there should be to obtain a consensus of all the parties represented. At that point, the agreed plan of action must be declared and shared in full with the Turkish public. It is also important to have a timeline and a detailed description of the steps to be taken.

As for the contents of this social contract, it will most certainly have to include political, economic, legal, social and cultural measures to address the grievances of citizens of Kurdish origin and more. The concerns of all other cultural and religious groupings must also find its place in such a contract. The practical goals are to provide employment, health and education services and the improvement of the quality of life in general. For this strategy to work, it needs to be feasible, integrated and comprehensive. Furthermore, many of its elements have to be implemented simultaneously for it to succeed and produce tangible results.

What, then, needs to happen? First, the Turkish government must get its priorities right. Rather than the headscarf issue or the creation of a new constitution, the ruling circles must first concentrate on terrorism and sever its links with Kurdish-related issues. The government must quickly proceed to draft a comprehensive approach to resolve these issues and, after a consensus decision of Parliament, begin to implement the agreed measures. If this is not done, Turkey's energies will continue to be dissipated in an endless effort limited to the containment of terrorists alone, without addressing the problem of terrorism. The present window of opportunity will have been missed. The burden of coping with the roots of terrorism will have been passed to the next generation. That is neither a positive nor a just prospect.