

Terror attack claims at least 15 lives in central Turkey

By Halil Celik
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A suicide car-bomb attack Saturday in the city of Kayseri in central Turkey killed 15 soldiers and wounded and 54 others, including civilians. Twelve of the wounded are in intensive care, with three in critical condition.

No one has assumed responsibility of the attack, on a bus transporting civilians and off-duty military personnel. However, it was widely assumed to be the work of the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), an offshoot of the Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

A week ago, on December 10, TAK organized a twin bombing attack near a football stadium in Istanbul, killing 44 people and wounding 155. TAK claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was retaliation for Turkish army operations in Turkey's Kurdish areas, and a protest against the continuing imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who was imprisoned in 1999.

After the Kayseri attack, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan noted that terror attacks in Turkey were bound up with the wars in Syria and Iraq. "We will decisively fight these terror organizations in the spirit of national mobilization," he said.

Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım remarked, "These incidents cannot weaken our struggle, rather it increases our determination." He said "foreign forces" were implicated in the successive bombings.

Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu said terrorist organizations would be defeated "if people stand right and proud after the attack," while far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli called for intensified struggle against terrorism.

Turkish Chief of General Staff General Hulusi Akar joined in, telling the state-run Anadolu Agency, "The Turkish army is determined to combat terrorists until the last terrorist is neutralized."

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), the third-biggest party in the Turkish parliament and the main

target of the Turkish government's so-called "war on terror," also issued a statement, in which it "strongly condemned the attack." However, right-wing mobs attacked HDP offices in cities across Turkey. The Erdoğan government for its part is continuing its attacks on the Kurdish nationalists.

The US Embassy, the British ambassador to Turkey, and the German and French foreign ministries, as well as Russian Foreign Minister Serge Lavrov, condemned the attack.

The terror attacks in Kayseri and Istanbul, the latest in a series of bombings in Turkey, serve only to disorient masses of people and strengthen the most reactionary social forces. These successive terror attacks are rooted above all in the US-led imperialist interventions in the Middle East, and the bloody consequences of decades of war in Iraq and now in Syria—in which the Turkish government is participating.

Washington and its European and Middle East allies have relied principally on a series of Islamist militias to carry out terror bombings in the initial stages of the conflict and then to wage a protracted proxy war against the government of President Bashar Al Assad.

The imperialist powers' reliance on Kurdish nationalist militias as proxies in Syria blew apart Erdoğan's attempt to develop a "peace process" with the PKK and other Kurdish nationalist forces.

Given the organization's murky background and identity, TAK's claiming of the Istanbul attack hardly resolves the question of who is behind the attacks. The Turkish regime itself said that broader forces were involved than simply the Kurdish nationalists. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş told private news channel NTV, "Behind these terrorist organizations are the various supports of several countries."

It is of course possible that the bombings were carried out by Kurdish nationalist forces. They have been active

in the fighting in Syria and against the Turkish army's repression of Kurdish areas in Turkey, as well as its offensive in northern Syria. In late August, Ankara launched its ongoing Euphrates Shield Operation against the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), the main proxy force of the US in Syria, while heavily bombing PKK camps in northern Iraq.

The Kurdish nationalist groups are potentially threatened by the developing ties between Turkey and Russia, as well as the Syrian government, in the aftermath of the July 15 NATO-backed coup against Erdoğan. With the NATO-backed forces in the region in retreat, the Kurdish nationalists could find themselves isolated and facing a joint offensive of Moscow, Ankara and Damascus.

"Turkey and Syria will always be more important to Russia than a Kurdish experiment in self-governance opposed by both Ankara and Damascus," wrote German state broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*.

It is conceivable that groups linked to the PKK could have decided to mount such an attack as a warning to Erdoğan not to move against the Kurdish nationalists in alliance with other regional powers.

On the other hand, each terrorist attack carried out by TAK or PKK has played into the hands of Turkish ruling elite. The attacks could lead to the proclamation of martial law, strengthening the military's hand and implicitly threatening the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government after the July 15 NATO-backed coup, or strengthening Erdoğan's drive to establish his own presidential dictatorship.

A day after the Istanbul bomb attack a week ago, Yildirim, CHP leader Kilicdaroglu and MHP leader Bahçeli had reached a "consensus on a joint stance on the fight against terror". At a joint press conference following the meeting, they claimed that the fight against terrorism was "an issue above politics."

In their initial statements after the terror attack in Istanbul, Yildirim and Erdoğan vowed that the perpetrators would "pay a heavier price". After visiting the wounded on December 11, Erdoğan said, "Our people should have no doubt we will continue our fight against the scourge of terror until the end. If they are aiming to scare us by means of such attacks, they should know that we have not degraded ourselves so much as to leave the ground to those scum."

Since February 2016, the PKK and TAK have taken responsibility for 11 suicide bombings or car bombs,

killing 103 and injuring some 800 others. The AKP government has escalated its attacks against HDP, the third largest party in the Turkish parliament, relying on growing popular anger over these attacks.

In May, the Turkish parliament lifted the immunity of 138 representatives, largely from opposition parties. Amid escalating attacks on opposition media and the HDP, the TAK claimed a car-bomb attack in central Istanbul on June 7, 2016, giving another pretext to the government for its dictatorial and militarist drive. Thus, immediately after the attack, Erdoğan approved the law lifting the immunity of 138 lawmakers, paving the way for criminal proceedings against them.

Based on the comments of Erdoğan and Yildirim after the most recent attacks, public prosecutors ordered the detention of some 400 people, including two HDP lawmakers. All detentions were on charge of having "links to or conducting propaganda for terrorist organizations."

This followed the November 4 arrest of nine HDP lawmakers, including both co-chairpersons Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. Since the last general elections in November 2015, thousands of Kurdish politicians, from both the HDP and its sister party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), have been arrested on charges such as "terrorist propaganda and links with the PKK."

The string of terror attacks have also enabled the Turkish ruling elite to promote Turkish nationalist and militarist propaganda justifying its military operations in Kurdish towns of the country. The price of months-long so-called anti-terror operations was the total destruction of Kurdish-populated towns, leaving over 1,000 dead and forcing some 400,000 people to flee their homes.

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