

The Kurds Under Erdogan's Tyrannical Governance

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Tens of thousands have been killed over 40 years of bloodletting between Turkish forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and tragically there seems to be no end in sight. In May 2016, President Erdogan stated that military operations against the PKK will continue until "the very last rebel is killed." What is alarming about Erdogan's statement is that he still believes he can solve the conflict through brutal force. Erdogan does not understand that he cannot wish the Kurdish problem away—a problem that will continue to haunt him and the country for countless more decades unless a solution is found that respects their cultural and fundamental human rights.

There are 15 million Kurds, representing nearly 18 percent of the Turkish population. Like their Turkish counterparts they are largely Sunnis, but their cultural distinction trumps their religious beliefs. They are fighting to preserve their ethnic identity, fearing that otherwise their culture and language would fade away and die.

The history of the conflict is long, complicated, and painful. In the 1970s Abdullah Öcalan raised awareness about the Kurds' plight, which was followed by crackdowns by successive Turkish governments, leading to the formation of the PKK and further escalation of violence over the years.



Former flag of PKK (Source: CRW Flags Inc.)

Under intensifying domestic and EU pressure, Erdogan agreed to restart negotiations in late 2012, which collapsed by July 2015. In the wake of the failed military coup in July 2016, Erdogan moved to crush the PKK and Kurdish aspirations, even though to date there has been absolutely no proven connection between the Kurds and the coup plot. His rampage against the Kurds continued despite the US' and EU's call to stop his heavy-handed approach that grossly violated their basic human rights. Only recently, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim announced in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir that around 14,000 Kurdish teachers will be suspended, falsely accusing them of having ties with the PKK.

What made matters worse was Erdogan's authorization to launch a fierce attack on PKK forces who were embedded in a civilian Kurdish-majority community in the southeast. A UN report documented human rights violations including killings, disappearances, torture, destruction of houses, and prevention of access to medical care, while leaving the area in ruins.

Between July 2015 and December 2016, more than 2,000 were killed, including 1,200 civilians and 800 members of Turkish security forces, and more than 500,000 were displaced. Hundreds of members of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) were put behind bars on charges of collaborating with the PKK. Erdogan continues to refuse to negotiate, insisting that the PKK is a terrorist organization and must be brought to heel by military force.

Certainly, what is wrong or right matters, but what we must face here is a reality that neither side can ignore and expect to find a solution that can exclusively meet the requirements of either side. After more than four decades of bloody conflict that has claimed the lives of so many, and the destruction from which hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Turks have suffered, when will Erdogan come to his senses that the solution lies only in peace negotiations?

What is worse is that the international community, especially the EU and the US, has been publicly silent about Erdogan's transgressions and ruthlessness. They often cite Turkey's role in fighting ISIS, its NATO membership, and its geostrategic importance as an energy hub as the reason behind their unwillingness to pressure him to change direction.

That said, and regardless of the challenges that Turkey faces—including the fight against ISIS, a deteriorating economy, domestic upheaval aggravated by the failed coup, and the pressure of hosting three million refugees—nothing justifies Erdogan's outrageous purges.

His utter disregard for human rights by jailing scores of Kurdish journalists, arresting a dozen Kurdish parliamentarians, employing collective punishment tactics against Kurdish towns and villages, and attacking Syrian Kurds whom he accuses of providing aid to the PKK, only further heightens tensions throughout the country, invites terrorism, and leads to increasing social and political polarization.

As a believer who preaches the gospel of Islamic values, he vilifies and violates these values and conveniently justifies the indiscriminate killing of innocent Kurdish men, women, and children, and still shamelessly claims self-piety.

Erdogan's demagoguery is second nature to him. As President Kennedy said in the 1960,

"Voices preaching doctrines wholly unrelated to reality... [delude themselves that] strength is but a matter of slogans."

Erdogan claims that Turkey is a full-fledged democracy, but he is dismantling the last vestiges of the country's democratic governance that he himself promoted during his first and second terms in power.

He claims that the Kurds have equal political and human rights like any other Turkish citizen, and points out the fact that there are 110 Kurdish parliamentarians. True, they are

equal under the Turkish constitution, but in practice are systematically discriminated against in government appointments, business contracts, job opportunities, and education.

Erdogan simply does not grasp the fact that even if the Kurds were treated equally in every walk of life, what they want is in line with and even complimentary to the framework of Turkish democracy. They are not seeking a state of their own, but simply to live freely as loyal Turkish citizens and enjoy their customs, folk music and dance, and way of life consistent with their long and rich cultural heritage.

The irony is that while Erdogan wants the Kurds to be loyal citizens, he never understood that their allegiance to the country depends on the way they are treated, the rights they are granted, and the civility they are accorded. To demand from the Kurds unconditional loyalty while robbing them of their basic rights only further alienates them and forces them to seek, fight, and die for autonomous rule if not independence, which he is bent on preventing.

I do not support, and I condemn any individual or group who uses brutal force for political or social gains regardless of its source, motivation, ideology, or belief. Erdogan and the PKK are equally guilty, and must pause and think where all this killing and destruction will lead to, when at the end of the day they will still have to coexist and face one another.

When violent extremism is on the rise, when human rights are fair game, when terrorism is surging, when ethnic violent conflicts are escalating, and when thousands of men, women, and children are slaughtered, leaders of conscience must not add fuel to the raging regional fires that have been consuming us unmercifully and relentlessly.

The PKK must not play into the hands of dictators like Erdogan by killing innocent civilians; as long as they are viewed as a terrorist group, they will not receive any support from influential civic organizations and the Turkish population in general.

To shed the stigma of being a terrorist organization, the PKK must declare a unilateral ceasefire and express its readiness to enter peace negotiations unconditionally, which would increase public pressure on Erdogan to resume peace talks.

Absent American leadership, the EU must assume upon itself the responsibility to use its enormous political and economic leverage to stop Erdogan from pursuing ruthless methods and policies not only against the Kurds, but his own fellow Turkish citizens. Erdogan's nationalist zealotry is dividing the country and could potentially lead to widespread violence among the Turks, while further intensifying regional instability.

Mr. Erdogan, wake up. You will not succeed in killing every PKK fighter—not only because of the nature of guerilla warfare, but primarily because of the Kurds' determination to preserve their rich cultural heritage, language, and fundamental human rights. They will remain resolute and will outlast you, regardless of how much pain and suffering they endure under your tyrannical governance.

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