

Henri J. Barkey
Lehigh University
Testimony for the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

AT WHAT COST?
The Human Toll of Turkey's Policy at Home and Abroad

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Under the increasingly authoritarian rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has rapidly moved away from any semblance of democratic governance. The government has used the failed coup of July 2016 as a pretext to winnow the bureaucracy, military, political system and civil society of its enemies, real and mostly imaginary. The rule of law in Turkey has suffered a great deal to the point that we can no longer speak of its existence. The rule of law in Turkey has come to mean “whatever President Erdogan wants.” Intellectuals, journalists, professors, politicians, judges and any dissidents end up being incarcerated for no reason whatsoever. Some of the accusations occupy the realm of the absurd. One of Turkey’s leading intellectuals and authors, Ahmet Altan, received a life sentence for sending “subliminal messages” on television on the eve of the July 2016 coup.

I can add my own travails with Turkish authorities as a revealing example of the farcical nature of the legal system. I was accused of being a mastermind of the same coup simply because I happened to be in Istanbul that July 2016 weekend running a conference on the impact of the Iran nuclear deal on Iran’s neighbors. After initiating an extensive press campaign against me, the authorities issued an arrest warrant for me.

The Turkish judicial system, even before Erdogan, was far from being a fair one. Crossing the state’s ideological boundaries would result in trials and imprisonment. What changed with Erdogan is not just the scale of the persecution but also the personalization of whole legal system. Thousands are languishing in jails, a scale not seen since the worst of the military interventions, the 1980 coup. What matters first and foremost is the president himself; heavy prison sentences are doled out for any signs of lese majesté. The prosecutions are arbitrary and capricious. If the president wants you prosecuted, a tweet posted years ago can be used as the pretext to initiate hearings and imprison someone. Effectively, he has become the state. The takeover of the state by a quasi-populist authoritarian leader intent on shaping society in his own image while brooking no dissent is one of the reasons why Turkey is now ranked 110th among 167 countries on the Economist’s Democracy Index, just below Nigeria and the Palestinian Authority having declined by 10 ranks compared to the previous year.

If President Erdogan's authoritarianism is one cause at the root of Turkey's struggle with democracy and rule of law, the other is the Kurdish Question which is far more structural and of longer standing. Nonetheless, Erdogan has also aggravated this problem of late.

Kurdish Question

Ever since the disposition of Kurdish lands in the post-World War I treaties, the Kurds have continuously rebelled in all four countries to which they relegated to: Iraq, Turkey, Iran and now Syria. Turkey with the largest Kurdish population in its midst from the beginning of the Turkish republican leaders assumed an uncompromising position vis a vis Kurdish demands, be they cultural, associational or political. The use of the Kurdish language was banned: one could not teach it, use it to publish books or newspapers and even place names were Turkified and parents could not name their children Kurdish names. There was brief "Kurdish Spring" of sorts starting in 2013 when the government initiated "peace talks" with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which it has always called a terrorist organization—many Turkish allies, including the U.S. have adopted this terminology. There were indirect negotiations between the state and the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan. The peace process was not to be successful and was literally buried by the ascent of the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria, ISIS, and its 2014 siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani. Erdogan made it clear then that he very much preferred an ISIS victory over the Syrian Kurds.

This signaled the beginning of the end of all accommodation with Kurds as a wave of repression swept Turkey. This new surge in persecution was different than what Kurds had experienced in the past. What had changed was the emergence of viable political party capable of giving voice nationally to Kurdish hopes and expectations. For the first time in modern Turkish history, a political party espousing a Kurdish identity, the HDP, People's Democratic Party, succeeded in crossing the 10 percent threshold necessary for parliamentary representation. In both national elections in 2015 and again in 2018, HDP ended up with the third largest number of seats in parliament. The party also sought to broaden its base by appealing to other minorities in society; in the final analysis, it was its Kurdish base it succeeded in mobilizing that carried it across the 10 percent threshold. Erdogan had hoped that his "peace overture" would convince Kurds in Turkey to align themselves with his Justice and Development Party, AKP, at a time when he was also considering changing Turkey's constitution by introducing a presidential system in lieu of a parliamentary one. After all, no other Turkish leader had gone as far as he had along the path of reconciliation. He was surprised by HDP's decision to run on a platform of its own in the 2015 elections rather than run independent candidates in selected districts, a strategy that heavily favored the AKP. HDP's success in the first of the 2015 elections denying Erdogan a majority sealed the fate of the peace process.

Unable to halt the rise and influence of HDP and fearing a domestic and international backlash against closing it down altogether, the Erdogan administration started a deliberate course of action designed to systematically weaken the party by jailing its leadership and parliamentary members on spurious charges. Selahattin Demirtas, the charismatic HDP leader, who had engineered the party's transformation, was imprisoned

pending his trial and then sentenced in 2018 to more than four years. He faces a multiple of other charges that can add some 140 additional years to his sentence. As with the case of other HDP MPs, Demirtas was accused of “terrorist propaganda,” “being a member of a terrorist organization” and a slew of other terrorism related crimes. The party’s co-leader Figen Yüksekdag was similarly charged and convicted while also facing a multitude of other court cases. The campaign went beyond the leadership and included other members of parliament. As of March 2019, there were 9 HDP parliamentarians had been incarcerated and this number has declined to 7 today.

In a paradoxical manner, the 2019 municipal elections proved Erdogan’s fears regarding the HDP. It showed that despite the pressure the government had subjected it to, it could still act in a strategic manner that would undermine Erdogan’s best laid plans. HDP chose not to present candidates in the three largest municipalities, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Instead it asked its supporters to vote against the AKP and for the mainstream opposition party, the Republican People’s Party, RPP. The HDP decision turned out to be decisive in ensuring the victory of the RPP candidate Erdogan’s AKP. For the first time since 1994, Erdogan lost control of Istanbul and more importantly its rich resources his party members benefitted from and transferred into AKP coffers. Ironically, Erdogan anticipating a reversal in Istanbul even sanctioned visits to the imprisoned Ocalan, in an attempt to blunt HDP’s call to its voters to support the main opposition parties. It did not work.

The step-by-step process of dismantling HDP has also extended to mayoralities. HDP won many municipalities, especially in majority-Kurdish parts of the country. Mayors and municipal councils represent the foundational blocks of HDP. That is where the party attempts to build its base, develop political loyalties through the dispensation of services and act as a conduit for the transfer of funds. Erdogan in an effort to deny the HDP resources and detach it from its base, has had these elected mayors dismissed and replaced by what are called “*kayyums*,” functionaries appointed by the central government. Thus, the local population’s elected representatives, the ones that are most relevant to their daily lives, are replaced by bureaucrats whose only allegiance is to the central government and Erdogan. Hundreds of mayors have been dismissed. Among them is one of the most distinguished of Kurdish politicians of recent memory, the 77-year old Ahmet Türk who has been a stalwart of Turkish politics. Elected mayor of Mardin in 2014, he was dismissed along with 100 other mayors in 2016 and then jailed. He was released from jail and then ran again in 2018. [Soon after winning his election he was once again dismissed by the government](#) together with mayors from other large municipalities of Diyarbakir and Van.¹ As of August 2019, some 40 mayors were in detention.

If one part of the campaign against elected HDP politicians is designed to undermine the foundations and existence of the party, the other aims to delegitimize it in the eyes of the Turkish (and international) public. The government in each and every instance accuses the

¹ Ahmet Türk, “Voters chose me as their mayor. President Erdogan had other ideas.” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2019.

party's leaders as well as all the rank and file members of affiliation with or membership in or supporting terrorism. With the press completely controlled by the government, internet sites deemed undesirable blocked the accused have no means to dispute these claims however outlandish they may be. No action or no form of protest is immune to these types of accusations. For instance, vigils by mothers who since 1990 have been gathering to commemorate the disappearance of their kin were deemed illegal because in the words of "Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said the group (Saturday Mothers) was exploiting the concept of motherhood to mask support for terrorism."²

Harassment of Kurdish activists, journalists and even ordinary individuals has also picked up pace. Most recently, for instance, Nurcan Baysal, an author who was in London as a writer-in-residence, found out that her house was raided and ransacked by 30-40 armed officers at dawn because she had shared critical ideas on social media.³

The relentless campaign to dismantle and delegitimize the HDP will necessarily lead to the deepening of interethnic tensions and acceleration of polarization in society. In turn, this does not augur well for the future of Turkey; Kurds are unlikely to give up their demands and the government will have to resort to increasing levels of repression. Kurdish aspirations for rights, be they elementary cultural or political one, are older than the AKP and Erdogan. Hence there is no reason to expect that they will not continue to agitate in one form or another. Over the years, Kurds have been inventive finding new ways to resist. Even if sites on the internet (including Wikipedia) are blocked and the Turkish state's coercive power has increased significantly, the fact remains that new technologies, a savvier youth, greater awareness and the emergence of powerful diaspora communities will ensure that the cause is kept going. The HDP offered a political forum for the peaceful articulation of grievances and demands. Absent that, disillusionment, especially among the youth, is likely to result in greater support for the PKK and an increase in violence. The "peace process," in its heyday, had been instrumental in providing an opportunity for a deceleration of societal hostility. Erdogan cannot will the "peace process" to be erased from the Kurdish conscience; hence Kurds will remember that fleeting moment of better days and that will fuel their determination to continue the struggle.

Kurds and Turkish foreign policy

The recent incursion in Syria was accompanied by Erdogan's demonization of Syrian Kurds.⁴ His declared intent to cleanse parts of northern Syria of Kurds has resonated poorly among Turkey's Kurds angering them further. Kurds in Turkey are particularly attached to Syrian Kurdish groups, especially to the YPG, the People's Protection Units, their links to

² U.S. State Department, *Turkey 2018 Human Rights Report*, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/TURKEY-2018-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

³ "[Writer in residence Nurcan Baysal's home in Turkey raided](https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/writer-in-residence-nurcan-baysals-home-in-turkey-raided/)," English Pen, October 19, 2019. <https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/writer-in-residence-nurcan-baysals-home-in-turkey-raided/>

⁴ "[Erdogan threatens to 'crush the heads' of Kurdish fighters refusing to withdraw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/19/erdogan-threatens-to-crush-the-heads-of-kurdish-fighters-refusing-to-withdraw)," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2019.

the PKK notwithstanding or perhaps because of them. As a result, Turkish Kurds have had stronger affinity to their Syrian brethren than their Iraqi ones.

Turkey's fear of its domestic minority is at the heart of its Syrian incursion. As much as Erdogan tried to brand the YPG as a terrorist organization, the fact of the matter is that this organization, especially because of its alliance with the U.S. did not undertake any hostile action against Turkey. Nevertheless, for Erdogan, the Syrian Kurds do constitute a strategic threat. Turkey is already a direct neighbor to a federal and autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, the KRG, is the by-product of another American intervention in the region following the Kuwait war in 1991 and the 2003 war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

In view of the U.S. alliance with the Syrian Kurds and the de facto emergence of a Kurdish-run politically autonomous zone amidst the chaos of the Syrian civil war, what alarmed Erdogan the most was for the Americans to act as a midwife to one other autonomous Kurdish entity on Turkey's southern border a la KRG. Even though Turkey has managed to contain and even provide a bear hug of sorts to the KRG, the advent of two contiguous autonomous regions recognized by the international community could engender similar ideas among Turkish Kurds. As remote this possibility may have been, it remains a worst-case scenario, one that Erdogan could contemplate or much less accept.

Turkey's actions in Syria risked endangering its relations with both the United States and its NATO partners. President Trump's hasty decision to provide Turkey with a greenlight to intervene against the Kurds has been uniformly condemned in the American body politic. The U.S. Congress is still contemplating imposing sanctions to punish Turkey for its intervention as the House of Representatives has voted overwhelmingly to condemn Ankara. The Syrian incursion coming on the heels of the S-400 missile purchase from Russia has embittered lawmakers, government officials and others. As this hearing also confirms, Erdogan's iron clad rule, his disregard for any semblance of democracy and the persecution of his opponents has given rise to concerns about the future of Turkey, a valuable NATO ally. President Trump notwithstanding, Turkey's image in Washington has never been worse. And this does not augur well for the future.