



A new superpower in the Middle East?

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The end of March, Nowruz?Kurdish New Year, saw a massive upsurge in fighting between the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish army. Fighting centred around towns in the Kurdish areas of south east Turkey near the Iraqi and Syrian border.

In the towns of Cizre and Sirnak Turkish police and army forces opened fire on demonstrators carrying PKK slogans and banners outlawed in Turkey. PKK guerrillas and their supporters took over whole areas of some towns. The army brought in armoured cars and battle tanks to quell the rising. When peace was restored over seventy Kurds were dead, mostly civilians shot on the demonstrations or in cross fire.

The events gave a hollow ring to the promises of the new government of Suleyman Demirel which had come to power in the elections last October promising to cure the Kurdish question with affection?.

Demirel heads a coalition government of his own True Path Party (TPP) and the Social Democratic Peoples Party (SDPP) led by Erdal Inonu. The victory of the coalition over the extreme right wing Motherland Party (ANAP) reflected the desire to move away from the army supervised constitutional dictatorship which existed under the presidency of Turgut Ozal, ANAP's leader.

On coming to power Demirel announced a programme which was designed to appeal to the EC. Turkey had been excluded from the EC because of its instability and appalling human rights record under the military dictatorship of the early 1980s and under Ozal.

Demirel promised a new liberal constitution to replace the extremely repressive one imposed by the military. He promised an end to torture, a return to the rule of law and a set of administrative reforms for the Kurdish areas designed to tackle some of their grievances. Few of these promises have been kept.

While in opposition Demirel criticised the heavy handed approach of the security forces in Kurdish areas. However, under his government the army have stepped up their repression in these areas. In the first hundred days of the government scores of Kurdish civilians have been murdered by death squads operated by a wing of the police and army. Kurds have been shot at funerals of PKK militants, others have died after interrogation and torture. Two journalists working on radical papers were shot within a week of one another.

A particular target has been the Peoples Labour Party (HEP) which has 22 Kurdish deputies. It is constantly attacked by the right wing as a front for the PKK and two of its more outspoken members, one who dared take the oath to the Turkish republic wearing a headband in the Kurdish colours, have already been expelled from the coalition.

The army has been demanding a more or less free hand to deal with the growing insurgency in the south east. They have become particularly alarmed at the growing influence and effectiveness of the Kurdish Workers Party. The PKK came out of the revolutionary student movement that exploded in Turkey in the 1970s and is led by Abdullah Ocalan on Marxist-Leninist principles. It launched a guerrilla based armed struggle in 1984 and attacked not only the army and police but also those that it considered collaborators with the government.

The government replied by mobilising the big Kurdish landowners and setting up a system of village guards dependent on them and the government. These now number some 24,000 and are particular targets of the PKK. The

bases for rural class struggle in the Kurdish area of Turkey is clearly there. Eight per cent of the landowners own over 50% of the land, while 40% own less than ½ hectare, barely enough to survive on. Per capita income in the area is only 50% of the Turkish average while unemployment, high in the rest of Turkey at 25%, is estimated to be double that in the Kurdish areas.

The PKK has built on this discontent. Its anti-feudal and anti-imperialist rhetoric has been accompanied by demands for an independent Kurdistan and its political dominance has been aided by a policy of eliminating opposing Kurdish political forces and its own dissidents, by force if necessary. At the same time the PKK has been willing at various times to drop its demands for an independent state and call for autonomy, most recently in Ocalan's calls for negotiations with the new Demirel government.

By 1988 the PKK felt strong enough to move its struggle from the mountain areas to the towns and cities. Ironically this was helped by the army's campaign against the remote mountain villagers who they held responsible for aiding the guerrillas. It is estimated that over 1,000 villages were "emptied" or abandoned during the 1980s as the inhabitants fled to the safety of the towns, thereby strengthening the support for the PKK in the larger towns. In three months of 1988 alone over 300 deaths were recorded on all sides of the conflict.

The guerrilla insurgency has been further strengthened recently by the defeat of Iraq and the establishment of a Kurdish "protected zone". Many arms have fallen into the hands of the PKK and training camps have been set up inside Iraq to complement their camps in the Beqaa valley where they train with the support of the Syrian government which has its own outstanding territorial claims against Turkey.

In early March the Turkish airforce launched attacks against Kurdish villages in Iraq. The UN estimated that two-thirds of one village that had just been rebuilt after Saddam Hussein had destroyed it, was again destroyed. Many civilians were killed in that and ensuing raids against other villages in Iraq and south east Turkey. The government added that Syria might come in for the same treatment if it did not close down the PKK camps.

It was this stepping up of the military offensive that led to the mass killings around Kurdish New Year. Demirel's government had already given the go ahead for a "spring offensive" against the PKK which meant occupying towns, mass arrest and interrogating suspects with the aim of provoking the PKK into the open where the army could deal with it.

Demirel's new "human rights" image is now seriously tarnished. The army and the security forces appear to have been given a free hand to "pacify" the Kurdish areas again. This has led to deep strains in Turkey's relationship with some of the European imperialists, most notably Germany. Germany is Turkey's largest trading partner and an important arms supplier. Television pictures of ex-East German armoured cars being used against unarmed demonstrators was highly embarrassing, especially in a country which itself has over 400,000 Kurds from Turkey in its workforce. Even worse was to come. The German government had to announce that Leopard battle tanks being used had been exported because of "a bureaucratic error", despite their sale to Turkey having been banned by parliament!

While Germany suspended arms sales to Turkey, its other Nato allies had no such qualms. For the British government it was business as usual and it refused to join in Germany's condemnation of the events. The USA expressed its support for Demirel's policies.

In Turkey itself the exposure of the struggle of the Kurds via the mass media has had contradictory effects. The right wing is trying to stoke up Turkish chauvinism against the Kurds not only in the east but also in the major cities of Turkey, where over three million Kurds now live and work. Previously the mass of these Kurdish workers had been "invisible". They were forbidden to use their language, mobilise in Kurdish organisations, or publish in Kurdish. Now, with the lifting of some of these restrictions, they can become the target of the right who will attempt to use anti-Kurdish racism to divide the workers' movement.

The Turkish workers' movement has started to recover from the serious defeat inflicted upon it in the late 1970s and

from the military repression following the 1980 coup. The massive miners strike in the winter of 1990-91 was the first signal of this. The workers movement and the socialist left must take the lead in combatting all forms of Turkish chauvinism and attacks on the Kurds. It must demand complete freedoms under a new constitution not just for the socialist and trade union movement to organise, publish and to go on strike, but also for the Kurdish minority. It must demand complete freedom of speech, language rights, dress and culture to be guaranteed for the Kurds. It must also support the right of Kurdish self-determination in the east of the country, up to and including separation from Turkey if this is what the majority of Kurdish workers and peasants demand.

Above all the Turkish and Kurdish masses need a revolutionary workers' party, a Trotskyist party, that can unite their struggle into a fight against capitalism and imperialism aimed at removing the causes of poverty and oppression in Turkey and throughout the Middle East.

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