Tackling Radicalism in Turkey

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About this paper

This report is part of a four-part series that examines the threats posed to Turkey by regional instability, terrorism and extremism, and how the Turkish government has sought to manage or challenge these threats. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue is grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for supporting the publication of this series.

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1 Introduction

Despite of Turkey's strategic importance for regional security in both the Middle East and Europe, remarkably little scrutiny has been paid to Turkish responses to radical threats. Turkey today faces multiple security threats both from within its own borders and from international groups. Although the Turkish government typically prioritises Kurdish radicalism, over the last two years greater energy and resources have been deployed to confront other groups, such as ISIS. The state's primary response has been to confront such threats through tough security measures. What is more, many would argue that the AKP government, like many of its predecessors, has used the label of radicalism to police and suppress critics of its policies. To further complicate the picture, the challenges the Turkish state faces today are increasing in complexity following the onset of the Syrian civil war.

This paper provides a three-fold analysis to explain the factors that determine the AKP government's responses to radicalism. Firstly, it traces how radical threats are defined in Turkey by looking at (1) legislative definitions of terrorism and (2) the groups and ideas that are suppressed within the public sphere, even though they may not necessarily fulfil the legislative definition of a terrorist group or engage directly in violence. Such an examination reveals that the perceptions and definitions of

radicalism deployed by the government today derive, in large part, from a long-standing constitutional and legal tradition that emphasises the territorial indivisibility of the nation and its secular character.

Secondly, this paper posits that definitions of radicalism used by the state are often vague in nature, and this has enabled successive governments to generate security policies towards various groups based on the government's political interests. Regrettably, the AKP government has not been an exception to this historical trend. While secularist governments before AKP considered anti-secularism to be a radical threat and prosecuted those including members of the AKP, today the AKP government applies the same approach to critics of their brand of mildly Islamist and authoritarian conservatism.

Thirdly, the paper analyses the regional complexities and incentives that emerged due to the Syrian civil war, highlighting how these are shaping the AKP government's responses to radicalism. It presents the reasons from the Turkish government's perspective for its prioritisation of the PKK over threats from ISIS.

2 Defining radical threats

A radical group can be understood as one that refuses to work through existing institutions and seeks to overthrow the system entirely.[1] In other words, it rejects the status quo and embraces revolution. This is not to imply that being radical is synonymous with being anti-democratic. Some radical groups may view themselves as radical democrats who seek to impose a new democratic order, while other radical groups may be more authoritarian in nature. For example, the IRA, ETA and the PKK all claim to be radical democrats challenging imperial states while groups like ISIS seek a more autocratic end. In contrast, a moderate group may also wish to change the ruling system, but it is one that accepts the status quo as the appropriate route through which to pursue its goals and is somewhat willing to preserve existing power structures in pursuit of their goals.[2]

When defining radicalism in Turkey, key violent terrorist threats are classified as radical and duly proscribed and suppressed, and few would doubt these designations. Yet alongside this, other groups are designated as radical threats even though they do not engage in the use of violence and their threat is the challenge they pose to the ruling system.

The clearest statement of how the state defines radical threats is in legislative definitions of terrorism. The primary legislative framework for defining terrorism emphasises the means used, including coercion, violence, terror, and intimidation, and the purposes for which the act

is committed.[3] The purposes which constitute a terrorist act are broad and these include 'any act designed to impact the basic characteristics of the Republic or the country's political, legal, secular and economic systems' or 'any act designed to violate territorial or national integrity, and any act designed to jeopardise the existence of the Republic of Turkey'. Based on this framework, the Turkish National Police define terrorist threats as falling into three distinct categories:[4]

1   Separatist terrorist organisations – the most prominent threats in this category are the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* or the Kurdistan Workers' Party) and its off-shoot the TAK (*Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan* or Kurdistan Freedom Falcons)
2   Left-wing terrorist organisations – the most threatening of these is the DHKP-C (*Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi* or the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front), but the actual threat from radical left-wing terrorists today is fairly marginal
3   Terrorist organisations exploiting religion – the two most prominent threats to Turkey today are international in nature, namely ISIS and Al-Qaeda or Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.

Few would challenge Turkish designations of terrorism and the proscription of these groups is widely accepted and supported by the US, the EU and the UN.

The Turkish state also has a history of labelling certain dissident groups as radical and using this label to proscribe or persecute these groups on the basis of challenging core features of the state and/or ruling factions, even if they do not use the tactics of terror. Labelling dissenters as constituting a radical threat is possible thanks to the broad definition of 'security' deployed by the state. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sees Turkish security policy as 'ensuring the survival of the population; protecting territorial integrity, and preserving the basic identity of the nation'.[5] Similarly the Ministry of Interior focuses on the 'protection of homeland security and public order, indivisible unity with the country and nation, rights and freedoms laid down by the Constitution, public peace and general morality'.[6] This understanding of security was embedded within the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and has been robustly

promoted by the 'guardian state',[7] which has emphasised values like the indivisibility of the nation-state and the preservation of a secular order.

On the basis of such definitions, many would argue that successive Turkish governments have banned and suppressed activists, journalists, academics, civil society groups, and political leaders who were seen as pro-Kurdish, too Islamist, supporting a parallel state, or threatening either the position of the military or the ruling party.

3 Responses to radical threats

There are two broad models to explain state responses to radical threats, although intermediate positions between the two are often sought in practice.[8] A tolerant and accommodating approach prioritises freedom of expression and assumes that greater political inclusion of extremists in democratic processes will lead to their moderation. In contrast, intolerant approaches use more repressive legislative and security measures to protect the status quo. All states typically adopt robust security measures to combat terrorist threats where they have the capacity to do so.

However, when it comes to non-violent radical threats, state responses vary. They may be pragmatic where there is an identifiable political cause supported by a large portion of the population, such as Britain's response to Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland (even while imposing robust anti-terrorist legislation against the IRA). Others may adopt mixed responses, engaging in some accommodation but simultaneously engaging in suppressive measures, such as Spain's response to Basque separatists. Turkey has adopted primarily repressive measures towards groups it deems radical with a focus on security-based responses, whether such groups engage in the tactics of terror or not.

In terms of explicit counter-terrorism measures, Turkish responses combine criminalisation with the use of strong security measures. Turkey treats terrorist acts as criminal acts and dismisses claims that these are

political struggles. In addition to prosecution for engaging in terrorism, significant anti-terrorist legislation includes legislation on money laundering, financing terrorism, smuggling, and so on. Alongside this is the use of the security forces (the military and specialist counter-terrorist police units) to combat and defeat terrorism. The Turkish Military Forces (TSK) are heavily involved in domestic security, they have significant independence from public control, and its leaders contribute to the formulation of the national security strategy, a policy updated periodically which identifies the main threats facing Turkey.[9] It has been suggested that the power and autonomy of the TSK stems from their counterinsurgency campaign against Kurdish nationalists and Islamist activists, giving the TSK a sizeable incentive to maintain their campaign.[10]

This is not to say that government responses have been based exclusively upon military security measures. Two important programmes to counter radicalisation based on outreach and engagement are: (1) police outreach to populations vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists, including social projects and educational interventions; and (2) the Religious Affairs Office attempts to promote religious values that oppose the interpretations offered by violent Islamist groups.[11] However, those measures aside, there can be little doubt that the primary emphasis is to place security-based and military-based responses to the fore.

Following EU-Turkey negotiations between 2002 and 2013, it was hoped that adjustments to Turkish counter-terrorist legislation struck a better balance between security concerns and human rights.[12] However, with hindsight this looks like an optimistic claim. The use of security-based measures to tackle violent and non-violent threats has increased under the AKP government. In April 2014, a legislative amendment to existing law enabled the prosecution of journalists who reported on the activities of the Turkish Intelligence Services (MIT) and it exempted military officials from prosecution for acts undertaken in the course of their duties.[13] In March 2015 the Turkish parliament passed the 'Legal Package to Protect Freedoms', also known as the 'Internal Security Package'. This gave increased powers to the police to engage in surveillance without court supervision; it enabled the prosecution of demonstrators who fully or partially cover their faces; and it increased the access of the President

to discretionary funds to finance covert operations, a power hitherto reserved for the prime minister.

Any consideration of Turkish responses to radicalism needs to move beyond just looking at explicit counter-terrorist strategies and also take into account how the radical labels are deployed to contain dissent and criticism. For example, historically both ruling governments and the 'guardian state' have engaged in containing and suppressing the ideas promoted and debated by non-violent Kurdish activists and 'treated all public expressions of Kurdish cultural and political identity as support for the PKK, and it indiscriminately suppressed non-violent demands'.[14] A similar trend was evident towards relatively mild Islamist activists. The Turkish Constitutional Court has enforced the closure of several Islamist parties,[15] parties with pro-Kurdish programmes[16] and those with leftist and socialist tendencies.[17] In addition to dissolving parties, the state has prosecuted and arrested political activists and journalists seen to be promoting Islamist or pro-Kurdish viewpoints and engaged in extensive censorship in the name of combatting radicalism and protecting national security. All this inevitably also served to preserve ruling elites' positions of authority within the system.

It is within this historical context that the AKP government today seeks to tackle radical threats and it can be seen, in part, as locked within a path-dependent process of tackling both terrorism and non-violent dissent with a similar approach. As such, they are following an established tradition in Turkish politics and a tradition of which the AKP had itself been the attempted victim. Erdoğan himself was imprisoned for ten months for reading an Islamic poem at a public rally in Siirt and subsequently banned from politics – a ban which was only overturned by the AKP after it came to power. What is more, when the party entered government in 2002 they were initially met with suspicion from the judiciary and military who sought to suppress them due to the perceived Islamist threat they posed. The Constitutional Court attempted to prevent the AKP from choosing its preferred candidate as president in 2007. The Court sought to veto legislation that was seen as promoting Islamic values in the public sphere and legislation to alter the process of judicial appointments. It attempted to ban the AKP in 2008, although this proved impossible

given the levels of popular support that the party was consistently obtaining in elections.

However, over time the AKP embarked on a programme of reining in the army, notably through the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials,[18] and constraining the high judiciary.[19] Today the government continues to claim that elements in the judiciary are under the influence of the Gülen movement, an ex-ally of the AKP, and the government seeks to eliminate the movement's 'parallel structures' within the judiciary and the police. The Gülen Movement itself has been recently classified as a terrorist group and is equated by the government with the PKK as a terrorist threat.[20] The net result is that there is now less of an ability for the military and judiciary to designate non-violent, mildly-Islamist activities as posing a radical threat to Turkish state.

Instead the AKP has shifted the focus towards designating critics of their government as radical threats, often by linking them to Kurdish activism or by linking them to the notion of the existence of a parallel state within Turkey that is intent on undermining the will of the elected government. The AKP government has expanded the definition of a radical threat to include journalists, academics and activists who support Kurdish positions or who just criticise the government's stance towards the Kurdish issue, the government in general or the personal position of ruling elites. As such, the historical trend in Turkish politics towards using the apparatus of the state to suppress non-violent movements and to preserve the position of powerful groups has continued. Such threats are confronted in much the same way as terrorist threats, using the legislative apparatus to suppress them.

Suppression of dissent in the public sphere has been a common trait across successive governments and the AKP government is no exception. *Polity* has recorded a decline in the level of democracy in Turkey from a high of 9 in 2011–2013 to a score of 4 in 2015 (the scores ranges from an autocratic hereditary monarchy with a score of -10 to a consolidated democracy with a score of +10), implying that Turkey is becoming an illiberal democracy or 'partly free' to use *Freedom House*'s description.[21] Indeed under the AKP, a 'morality' agenda has also been pursued alongside these security policies, further creating

the impression of a state with an increasingly weak commitment to civil rights. High taxes have been imposed on the sale of alcohol and its consumption in outdoor spaces in large cities including Istanbul has been restricted; same-sex dormitories have been cautioned against for college students; legislation criminalising adultery has been proposed but later withdrawn; and, the Gay Pride march in Istanbul in 2015 was dispersed with water cannons and rubber pellets.[22]

What is more, *Reporters without Borders* in 2016 ranked Turkey 151st for press freedom out of 180 countries.[23] In 2015, Turkey had the fourth highest rate of imprisonment of journalists in the world (after China, Egypt and Iran).[24] Legislation from 2014 allows the Telecommunications Directorate to block websites without prior court approval. In 2015, the power to remove online content and block websites in the name of security was further enhanced. In March 2016, the Istanbul Criminal Court ruled that the Gülenist *Zaman* newspaper holdings should be seized. This followed an earlier decision in 2015 by an Ankara court to seize the Koza-İpek group, which owned the *Bugün* and *Millet* newspapers, also on the basis of connections to the Gülen movement. Numerous other examples of recent erosions of the ability of the press to give negative reports of government activity in the name of protecting security are abound, ranging from suppressing reporting about the Gezi park protests to the arrest of Can Dündar and Erdem Gül for reporting a story that the MIT was smuggling weapons into Syria. Self-censorship has increased within the media as a result.

Activists and academics have also seen their freedom increasingly restricted in the name of posing a security threat. Several academics are being prosecuted for engaging in terrorism after signing a petition requesting to end the ongoing fighting between the PKK and the Turkish police and military forces.[25] After a recent suicide bombing in Istanbul, President Erdoğan argued the right to freedom of expression should not protect individuals he dubbed 'supporters of terrorism'. He stated that an individual's title such as 'an MP, an academic, an author, a journalist do not change the fact they are actually terrorists. An act of terror is successful because of these supporters, these accomplices'.[26]

4 Prioritising the PKK?

Turkey today prioritises tackling Kurdish radicalism, even if this comes at the cost of responding effectively to international threats from outside its borders, such as that posed by ISIS. This has led to frustration from international allies. The US has claimed that as a result of Turkey's focus on internal threats 'efforts to counter international terrorism are hampered' and this 'can be an impediment to operational and legal cooperation against global terrorist networks'.[27] Placing the overriding emphasis on Kurdish radicalism can be traced to both internal factors within the Turkish state and external factors deriving from the Syrian civil war.

The definition of security that exists within the state doctrine sees it primarily in internal terms and the major threats identified are those that threaten the territorial unity of the Republic or threaten the secular nature of the state. International Islamic extremists may pose a terrorist threat, but they do not really threaten the existence of the state and its national identity and they have no interest in engaging in Turkish domestic politics. As such, they are not necessarily seen as a fundamental attack on the values of the Turkish nation, albeit the physical threat they pose is being taken ever more seriously as the number of attacks increase.

In contrast, the PKK and Kurdish nationalists are seen as posing a challenge to the territorial unity of the Republic and therefore they need to be countered. What is more, strong security responses to the threat posed

by the PKK are ingrained in the long-term path along which the state has evolved. Since its emergence in 1984 as an armed force, the PKK has been met with a robust security response. This was the case even for governments that embarked upon liberalising Turkey and Turkish democracy in many other respects. Indeed, strong security responses by successive governments, encouraged by the military, determined the tone for future governments. The AKP government today follows in this long institutional legacy, especially following the collapse of nascent peace talks between the government and the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 2015.

Alongside this, regional dynamics in Syria are seen by the AKP government as giving impetus to the push for Kurdish autonomy and possibly even separation. The main Syrian Kurdish group, the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* or Democratic Union Party) and its armed wing the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* or People's Protection Units), are viewed as an off-shoot of the PKK. The government's position is that there is cross and dual membership between the PKK and YPG and that the YPG is passing weapons to the PKK to supply its fight against the Turkish state (the PYD insists that their relationship with the PKK remains solely at an ideological level). Therefore Turkey refuses to co-operate with the PYD as the government fears that Syrian Kurds will seek to use any gains they secure in Syria to establish an autonomous Kurdish region on the border with Turkey, which will add impetus to the struggle of Turkey's Kurds.

This situation has created a particular set of incentives for the Turkish state that leads it to prioritise threats emanating from the PKK over threats from ISIS. For the state there was the possibility that gains for ISIS would resonate with wider Turkish goals of the removal of Bashar Al-Assad and the containment of the Kurds along the Turkish-Syrian border. Similarly, any curtailment of ISIS would possibly give a boost to the Kurdish population in Syria, whose close links with the Kurdish population in Turkey may have a contagion effect within its own borders. Therefore, from the Turkish state's perspective, prioritising the defeat of ISIS, including arming and supporting the PYD in Syria, was incoherent with the internationally accepted designation of the PKK as a terrorist group that threatens the internal stability of Turkey.

When it came to Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, the Turkish government took the risk of supporting the Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria to bolster relatively moderate Sunni Islamists at the expense of support for ISIS.[28] In this regard it was not supporting Al-Qaeda as an organisation, but it was doing so in the hope of achieving its wider regional and internal political goals while also undermining ISIS. It is only with reference to this complex web of relationships and wider regional dynamics that internal government priorities towards responses to radical threats can be understood.

This has led to critics claiming that the threat posed by ISIS was neglected and, in fact, the group was even able to prosper on Turkish soil.[29] It has been claimed that until 2014 'IS was able to maintain apartments, warehouses and even military training camps in Turkey. The group was able to organise supplies of weapons, munitions, food and medicines via Turkey. Islamic State sent its fighters to Turkish hospitals near the Syrian border for treatment. Dubious companies issued certificates of employment so that foreign jihadists were able to get year-long residency permits with no trouble at all'.[30]

There are signs that, over the last two years, Turkey has been increasing the priority it places on tackling ISIS. Following ISIS suicide-bombings in Diyarbakır and Suruç in 2015 and Istanbul in 2016, as well as ongoing rocket attacks on Turkey from within ISIS strongholds in Syria, Turkey became far more active in attacking ISIS positions.[31] In addition, increasing numbers of Syrian refugees entering the country (to date, over 2.5 million) are seen as best reduced by nullifying ISIS's push within Syria that is the cause of so much mass displacement.

Therefore, Turkey has increased its level of international cooperation and allowed İncirlik and Diyarbakır airbases to be used by international allies to undertake airstrikes against ISIS. It has also had an ongoing campaign using its own fighter planes to attack ISIS positions within Syria. In addition, it has done more within its own borders to restrict the movement of ISIS fighters and supplies in and out of Syria. A greater number of arrests have been undertaken within Turkey of jihadi fighters (but these waves of arrests have also been used to detain Kurdish fighters at the same time). Greater security has been imposed on its borders with

Syria in an effort to prevent easy travel for ISIS fighters and supplies.[32] These measures were declared by the ex-Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to be part of an ongoing and wider strategy rather than merely isolated responses to ISIS attacks within Turkey's borders.[33]

In spite of this increasingly robust response to the threat posed by ISIS, it remains abundantly clear that where the Turkish state has to choose between tackling ISIS or containing the threat posed by Kurdish nationalism, and to the extent that these two goals are seen as being in competition with one another, it will prioritise the latter.

5 Conclusion

Turkish responses to radicalism are primarily characterised by robust legislative and military responses that aim to confront, suppress, and defeat the threats. Few would doubt the validity of Turkish categorisations of the violent terrorist threats it faces. However, there is also a long-standing tendency within the state to deploy the radical label against groups who criticise parties or factions in power and to suppress them accordingly. This tendency is similarly observable under the AKP government.

The two main violent threats that Turkey faces today are from radical Kurdish nationalists and from radical Islamist terrorists. The state is clearly prioritising the internal threat from Kurdish radicalism and this is best explained with reference to the state's understanding of security and with reference to the incentives created for the Turkish state by the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Those who criticise the Turkish state for failing to robustly tackle ISIS or Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups neglect to take into account these dynamics from the Turkish perspective. Although as the number of attacks by ISIS on Turkish soil has increased so has the robustness of the state's response, this should not be taken to imply a weakening of the focus on Kurdish radicalism, which remains the state's main priority and which is unlikely to change in the short or long-term.

How can we expect Turkish responses to radicalism to develop in the future? The Turkish government is likely to maintain its emphasis

on security-based responses to Kurdish radicalism and its use of broad definitions of radical threats to include expressions of criticism and non-violent dissident activities. This is partly due to the historical tradition of its security strategy, which locks the current government in a particular path of policy responses. In addition, the fact that the AKP government has built its legitimacy on a form of moral populism that propagates the idea that the government, and therefore the state, is under threat from parallel structures and radical dissidents ensures that it will continue with its robust security responses. Indeed, especially since mid-2015, the government's legitimacy has become directly tied to the issue of security.

What is more, it is possible that this situation could become more entrenched going forward. Suppression of dissidents and the alienation of mainstream political ideas, combined with the volatile regional context, might lead to further dissent in Turkey, which may in turn incentivise the government to resort to even more severe security responses. Breaking this cycle is the great challenge facing Turkish society and it is not easily done.

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