

EUROPE

As Turkey Targets Militants, War Grips Kurdish Lands Once Again

By **TIM ARANGO** AUG. 24, 2015

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey — Across the Kurdish lands of southeast Turkey, a bitter war that had long been stilled by a truce has suddenly come roaring back, threatening to undo a hard-won economic turnaround here and adding a new battlefield to a region already consumed by chaos.

Cafes in this city that usually stay open until midnight now close at dusk. Jails are filling, once again, with Kurdish activists and officials accused of supporting terrorism. Residents say they are stocking up on weapons, just in case.

In the mountains, Kurdish guerrillas hastily set up vehicle checkpoints and then dissolve into the rugged terrain in a game of cat and mouse with Turkish soldiers. In the countryside, burned and mangled vehicles blight a landscape blackened by forest fires set by the Turkish Army — a tactic that destroys militant hide-outs but also apple and cherry orchards and stocks of feed for villagers' cows and goats.

“It shouldn't be like this,” said Kudbettin Ersoy, 66, who sells watermelons here from a wooden cart. “I was hopeful that peace would come and the blood would stop flowing. We are all citizens of this country.”

It has been one month since Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, resumed armed conflict against the militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K. Many — Kurds and political analysts alike — see the war as a coldly calculated political strategy by Mr. Erdogan, whose Islamist Justice and Development Party lost its parliamentary majority in national elections in June, to stoke nationalist sentiments and regain lost votes in a new election.

June's vote gave no party a majority, and a deadline for coalition talks ended fruitlessly on Sunday, paving the way for a snap election in November.

The war against the P.K.K. has also underscored the continued divide between the West and Turkey over how to handle the Middle East's raging wars.

Conflict with the P.K.K. resumed just as Turkey said it would join the American-led coalition against the Sunni militants of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh, who control a large part of Iraq and Syria. Turkey opened its air bases to the United States and began carrying out its own airstrikes against the group.

But since then, Turkey has carried out roughly 400 airstrikes against P.K.K. targets in the mountains of northern Iraq, where the group has bases, and inside Turkey, compared with three against the Islamic State. The imbalance has deepened a sense in the West that Turkey's priority is restraining Kurdish ambitions of autonomy that had gained momentum amid the region's turmoil, rather than fighting the Islamic State.

Even so, Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, told Reuters on Monday that Turkey would soon start a "comprehensive" air operation against the Islamic State in northern Syria.

The resumed war's toll so far can be measured in lives lost: more than 65 Turkish soldiers and police officers, and more than 800 people the government has identified as militants, according to the semiofficial Anadolu News Agency. The war is also being measured in the return of fear and old anxieties over a conflict that, through decades, claimed close to 40,000 lives.

"When the president couldn't make the government himself, he targeted the Kurds, and restarted this war," said Osman, who was sitting at a teahouse here one recent morning and gave only his first name because he was fearful of speaking openly against Mr. Erdogan.

Omer Tastan, a spokesman here for the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, or H.D.P., which for the first time exceeded a 10 percent legal threshold to earn representation in Parliament in Turkey's election in June, said that the government, in going after the militants, has also cracked down on the political side of the Kurdish movement.

“People working for the party are detained every day,” he said. “Young people are trying to protect their neighborhoods.”

The forest fires near Lice, a P.K.K. stronghold outside of Diyarbakir, are a menacing reminder of the tactics the Turkish Army used in the 1990s, the conflict’s cruelest decade.

“It is to intimidate the local people, to say that we can go back to the 1990s,” Mr. Tastan said.

Mr. Erdogan once saw peace with the Kurds as crucial to his legacy — two years ago, he said he would drink “hemlock poison” if it meant an end to the war. But many have come to believe that he now views war as the only way to preserve his power. And amid the tumult, Mr. Erdogan on Monday formally called for new parliamentary elections.

“We feel Erdogan personally restarted the war because of the elections,” said Yesim Alici, an H.D.P. official in Lice.

On the other side of the conflict, there are also signs of rising anger toward Mr. Erdogan and the government officials who have been attending, with great publicity, the funerals of Turkish soldiers killed by the P.K.K.

A Turkish military officer whose brother was killed in a Kurdish attack lashed out Sunday during the funeral, in a video that was widely circulated on social media in Turkey.

“Who killed him? Who is the reason for this?” Lt. Col. Mehmet Alkan shouted as he pushed through the crowd toward his brother’s coffin.

“It’s those who said there would be a solution, who now only talk of war,” he said, in a statement many took to be a reference to Mr. Erdogan and his previous efforts, now abandoned, for peace.

Government officials blame the P.K.K. for the renewed hostilities and say the group used the relative peace of recent years to rearm itself. While the P.K.K. has also stepped up its attacks against the Turkish state, and is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, it has also become more legitimized internationally over the past year. The group has fiercely fought the Islamic State in northern Iraq, and its affiliate in northern Syria has become a

reliable ally of the United States against the jihadist group there.

This is highlighted by the daily arrival of dead bodies of Kurdish fighters at the main cemetery here. They come from three battlefields: Iraq, Syria and Turkey. There are three teams of gravediggers working day and night, and cemetery workers have stocked up on wood for coffins and cloth for wrapping corpses.

“What the Kurds are doing in northern Iraq and in Syria against ISIS is not just for the Kurds, it’s for all of humanity,” said Mehmet Celik Kilic, who runs the cemetery.

On a recent afternoon, a woman who gave only her first name of Pakize was visiting the grave of her son, a P.K.K. fighter who died in northern Iraq three years ago, during the last outburst of conflict.

“God, this is enough,” she said. “The soldiers, the guerrillas, they are all our sons.”

Across the region, even as war has resumed, hopes for peace remain.

In the mountains outside the city of Tunceli — called Dersim by the locals, and the site of a massacre against the Kurds carried out by the Turkish state in the 1930s — villagers who had been expelled from their homes in the 1990s had only in recent years begun rebuilding their lives. Many took out cheap loans to build houses or invest in beehives to harvest honey, taking part in the expansion of consumer credit and the booming economy that Turkey enjoyed over the last decade.

On a recent morning, two women, sitting in the shade of an almond tree, said they already lost everything once, in the 1990s.

“Our house,” said one of the women, Zarife Tasbas, who said she was about 60. “Our animals. Our orchards and trees.”

Their surroundings are the very picture of bucolic mountain living: a verdant valley of grapevines and pear trees, set to the gentle background noise of a rolling stream. All this is in jeopardy, they say, because recently they were told by local elders — who were told by the army — that they must leave their homes because of planned military operations.

“We have told them we will lose everything if we leave,” said the other woman, Yomos Deniz, 55, who makes a living selling the honey produced by her 40 beehives. “We’d rather die than leave here.”

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