

Erdogan's War Against Democracy in Turkey: Interview with Mehmet Yuksele of HDP

by Jerry Gordon (March 2015)



Selahattin Demirtas, co-leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP)

Source: John Thys, AFP Getty Images

President Erdogan of Turkey has fomented a war against the Kurdish-led opposition after failing to achieve a super majority in the June 1, 2015 Parliamentary elections. An election that saw the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), co-led by Turkish Kurd, Selhatten Demritas, obtain 80 seats or 13 percent of Ankara Parliament. The HDP, with other Turkish opposition parties, defeated AKP super-majority control and Erodgan's quest to hold a referendum converting the largely ceremonial Presidential post to an executive one giving him near dictatorial powers – one that Erdogan said was similar to that of Hitler in Nazi Germany. In mid-July 2015, Erdogan relented and agreed to join the war against ISIS, opening up Incirlik Air Base [enabling](#) the US-led coalition to fly more frequent and shorter missions in support of Syrian PYD-YPG forces fighting ISIS. However, instead of fighting ISIS, Erdogan sent his air force to bomb PKK bases in northern Iraq.

Meanwhile, the AKP functioned as a minority caretaker government until Erdogan subsequently called for a snap election on November 1st. Exacerbating the situation, Russia entered the Syrian civil war on September 24, 2015 supporting the Assad regime bombing Turkmen and other opposition backed by Erdogan. On October 24th, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Sukhoi 24 bomber resulting in a complete break off in diplomatic relations between the two countries and the loss of billions of dollars in gas and agricultural trade for Turkey.

Across the border in Syria, PYD-YPG Kurdish forces were making significant headway with US air strikes against ISIS in northern Syria ironically threatening to block Turkish and Saudi trained opposition forces. Erdogan, who had called for establishment of a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border, drew red lines threatening actions should the PYD-YPG led Syrian Democratic Forces succeed in crossing the Euphrates River after they seized a strategic dam on the east bank. In Mid February 2016, PYD-YPG forces [crossed](#) the Euphrates and took the strategic Menagh air base with Russian air support not far from the Turkish border. When US special envoy Bret McGurk [met](#) with PYD-YPG leaders in Syria that led *Foreign Policy Magazine* to pose the [question](#) whether the Kurds were the power brokers in the Syrian conflict between the Russians and Americans.

In retaliation, Turkish military crossed the Syrian border and [entered](#) the Afrin Kurdish enclave establishing a foothold for creation of a possible barrier to prevent further Kurdish PYD-YPG advances. The PYD-YPG had wrested control of Rojava, the Kurdish northeast of Syria, which became a virtual autonomous self-governing region. Because the YPG is an affiliate of the Kurdish Workers' party (PKK) Erdogan had accused it of using arms provided by the US-led coalition in the War against ISIS against Turkish security forces. The PKK had been designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the EU and the US, despite the latter relying on the YPG in Syria as the effective ground force fighting ISIS.

A series of bombings occurred, beginning with one in Suruc in Southeastern Turkey on July 20, 2015, [killing](#) 33 Kurdish HDP volunteers. Turkish authorities blamed that on a Turkish Kurdish student with an alleged ISIS connection. Two sequenced bombings occurred on October 10, 2015 outside the train station in Ankara [ripping](#) through marchers in a peace rally organized by HDP just weeks before the November 1st snap election called by Erdogan. HDP suspended campaigning to avoid more events like this one producing mass casualties. More than 100 were killed and several hundred injured in what was a peaceful protest. These mysterious blasts were alternatively blamed on ISIS and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). Erdogan had entered into a cease fire agreement in 2013 with the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan who was still kept under house arrest on an island off Istanbul. But as the PKK gained recognition for its affiliates' role in both Iraq and Syria fighting against ISIS, its string of victories after Kobani in Syria may have triggered the return to armed conflict by the Erdogan

regime. Still, there was no formal explanation as to why the cease fire all but collapsed in July 2015. Turkey then resumed security operations against the PKK inside Turkey breaking the three year cease fire in the 30 year long irredentist war that had claimed more than 40,000, mostly Kurdish, lives.

Erdogan unleashed an outright war against the PKK and instituted punishing curfews against urban centers in the country's Kurdish southeast. Centers that, following PKK mandates, dug trenches to establish virtual autonomy zones enraging Erdogan. Those curfews in Southeastern Turkey's Kurdish urban centers like [Sur](#) in Diyarbakir are now in their fourth month of daily conflicts with security forces endeavoring to root out PKK activists. In the process, Erdogan's security forces have displaced more than 200,000 persons, killing over 500. Many of those Turkish Kurdish urban centers look eerily like the destroyed Kobani that was wrested from ISIS; by valiant Syrian PYD-YPG forces backed by US air strikes.

Erdogan's AKP achieved a comeback victory at the [polls](#) on November 1, 2015 winning almost 50 percent of the vote, 325 out of 550 seats in parliament and reclaiming control, but not a super majority, thwarting his plans for a national referendum. HDP's slate following the November 1, 2015 election fell to 59 seats or 10 percent in the Ankara parliament. There were accusations that the AKP's assertion of majority control had been achieved through [fraudulent balloting](#). Following the November 1, 2015 election results, HDP co-leader Demirtas was [cited](#) in *Time Magazine*, saying:

"He used the fear of violence as a weapon. This is how he rallied society around himself just like after Sept. 11 in the U.S., people began to support Bush more. After the attack in Ankara, people were afraid. They gathered around Erdogan."

He went on to say:

"I am in charge of administering one of the most difficult parties in the world," [he admitted]. But, he continues, "We have our principles. We are against armed struggle and against violence. We are also against the state's violations. We defend universal human rights."

As a teenager, Demirtas opted not to join the PKK as his brother did. Instead he became a lawyer and ultimately co-head of the HDP. He doesn't believe that

violence will achieve the ultimate end of a stable, democratic Turkey tolerant of minorities and others. Demirtas holds these beliefs despite the violent actions by Erdogan against Kurds in both Turkey and Syria.

Meanwhile, bombings and terrorist actions in urban centers continued throughout Turkey. A shaky cease fire reached in Munich by 20 countries has been implemented in Syria. January 13, 2016, a blast in Istanbul's historic Sultanahmet Square near the Blue Mosque [killed](#) 10 German tourists. On January 14, 2016, a car bomb [exploded](#) outside the Diyarbakir the police station killing 6, injuring 39, destroying the surrounding residential buildings. On February 18, 2016, another major blast [occurred](#), this time in Ankara, killing 28, injuring 61. The AKP blamed the Syrian YPG and the PKK for this latest blast. March 4, 2016 two women terrorists were [gunned](#) down attempting a grenade and machine gun attack on an Istanbul Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), a group that has repeatedly targeted police stations, largely in Istanbul suburbs.

Against this background, we had the opportunity to interview the Washington, DC representative of the HDP, Mehmet Yuksel on the February 21, 2016 [Lisa Benson Show](#). Mr. Yuksel, born in Turkey, grew up in Denmark where he obtained a degree in conflict resolution. He is a talented linguist speaking over six languages. What follows is a subsequent interview following the broadcast.



Jerry Gordon: Mehmet Yuksel, thank you for consenting to this interview.



Mehmet Yuksel: Thank you for inviting me

Gordon: How large is the Kurdish population in Turkey and where is the largest

concentration located?

Yuksel: Kurdish population in Turkey is about 25 million; the Kurds are mostly located in southeastern Turkey.

Gordon: What is the significance of the Kurdish-led Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) delegation in Turkey's Ankara Parliament?

Yuksel: Our goal in the Ankara Parliament is to start the decentralization of power in Turkey so that the minorities can be represented and will be allowed to represent themselves. The HDP represents 21 minorities including Kurds, Armenians, Yazidis, Assyrians and Turks. They will have a strong participation and a strong democracy.

Gordon: What is the history of Kurdish sectarian resistance in Turkey and how does the HDP differ in objectives from the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), a designated terrorist group by Turkey, the EU and the US?

Yuksel: PKK started as a political movement in the 1970's. However, after a state coup in the 1980s, PKK has been forced to use armed resistance to achieve its political goals. The Kurdish political parties that choose not to use arms became more marginalized and couldn't achieve any Kurdish rights in Turkey. In the 1990's, when Turkey wanted to become a member of the EU, it opened limited space for political parties' action. This created an opportunity to form the Peoples' Labor Party (DEP). For the first time it could represent Kurds with a small delegation in the Turkish Parliament. Unfortunately the DEP MP's were arrested and jailed for decades.

Since then we have tried to build a peaceful political space in Turkey, but paid a high price for it. For us a non-violent solution is the most important goal to achieve Kurdish objectives. Unfortunately weapons speak louder than non-violence and make our work much harder. However, we will push forward because only a peaceful solution works for everyone.

The HDP believes that if the Turkish State doesn't use violence against the PKK and Kurdish population, then the PKK would not resort to violence. In the last peace talks, PKK's demand was for more democratic actions and they were willing to end the fight in Turkey. We believe that both parties should come back to the table for negotiations. That is the best solution for Kurds and for Turkey.

Gordon: There have been several dramatic bombings with hundreds of casualties in Ankara, Istanbul, Suruc and Diyarbakir in the Kurdish southeast of Turkey. Who are the groups behind them?

Yuksel: First of all we have to see who has benefited from these bombings. They happened during the elections and were meant to intimidate people supporting the HDP. The attacks helped the AKP during elections to marginalize the HDP. The bombings were perpetrated by members of ISIL. This means that ISIL made the bombings to strengthen the AKP inside Turkey. However, they never claimed responsibility for these attacks.

Gordon: How severe is Erdogan's war against the Kurds in Turkey?

Yuksel: If you just look at a few Kurdish cities that have been under attack by the Turkish military, it is not very different from Syrian cities. In only six months it has caused more than two hundred and fifty thousand internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the deaths of more than 500 civilians who have been killed by security forces. This is a civil war, which began in Turkey. The AKP, instead of fighting the Kurds, should be fighting ISIL. It is true that the international media is not highlighting the human rights violations in Turkey; even Facebook has shut down many Kurdish articles and or private groups. Their reason is unclear as of today.

Gordon: Erdogan has accused the Syrian Kurdish PYD-YPG forces of providing US arms to PKK forces in Turkey. What evidence, if any, is there to support his allegations?

Yuksel: There is no evidence of it. Erdogan is trying to show that PYD's are Kurds and PKK are Kurds as well. Being Kurdish is enough evidence for Erdogan, to claim that they have given weapons. I don't think the PKK need weapons from the PYD. PKK has enough of their own weapons.

Gordon: With Turkish military shelling of Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG units and the provocative crossing of the Syrian frontier into the Kurdish enclave of Afrin, could that trigger intervention by the Russians despite NATO and US complaints lodged with Erdogan?

Yuksel: First of all, I don't think that Turkey has a right to tell Syrian Kurds what they can do or cannot do in Syria. Syrian Kurds are fighting against

ISIL for their protection and the protection of Kurds under ISIL control in the Jarabulus area. YPG will do their best to protect all Kurdish cantons and will try to assert control over the areas, which are majority Kurdish, but dominated by ISIL. YPG with Arab units will take over the territories where ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra's attacks come from. Turkey is not going to protect Kurds and they have proved it with Kobani. For Syrian Kurds this is a matter of survival on their territory.

Gordon: How extensive is the corruption in the AKP government and the family of President Erdogan?

Yuksel: His family has become very wealthy. His son in law is energy minister, and is going to control all of the bilateral agreements between Turkey and other countries in energy matters. Everyone knows that Erdogan is doing energy business benefitting his family with Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG).

Gordon: *Foreign Policy Magazine* had an article promoting the view that the Kurds have become the new power broker in Syria and that Erdogan's war against them could trigger a civil war inside Turkey. What is the view of the HDP about Erdogan's actions?

Yuksel: Erdogan has already begun the war against Kurds and PKK to gain support for his presidential ambitions. Ultra Turkish nationalists are supporting Erdogan. For these reasons Erdogan is warring against Kurds, in Syria and Turkey, to keep nationalist Turks with him. His objective is to hold a referendum to increase his powers under an executive presidential system. That means eventually he can get his strong presidential system and become Turkey's new dictator. Which, he has referred to as the equivalent of Hitler's system in Germany.

Gordon: What is the message that the Kurdish community in Turkey wants to convey to Americans and the World?

Yuksel: Erdogan's Turkey is creating chaos in the Middle East which is really not supportive of regional peace and stability. Kurds want Turkey to be more democratic and stable and which will respect minorities and diversities. We could be an American ally as well as a strategic role model for a peaceful and democratic Middle East. We think Kurds who live in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, can be a good ally to convert these countries to more secular and democratic

governments. This will help to ensure stability in the region. Kurds have already demonstrated this in Iraq and they are showing this also in Syria right now.

Gordon: Mehmet Yukse1 thank you for expressing the views of the HDP.

Yukse1: My pleasure.

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