

How Will Erdogan Treat the Kurds Going Forward?



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The Turkish Government and the Kurdish region in Turkey (Bakûr) have a long history of repression and struggle. Since World War I, [successive Turkish governments](#) have harshly restricted expression of Kurdish culture and ethnic and religious identities of the Kurdish people and worked in various ways to prohibit Kurdish participation in the country's political system and prevent economic development in Kurdish majority areas. In 1924, the Turkish government outlawed the existence of any [Kurdish](#) schools, cultural centers, organizations, and publications and forbade usage of the terms 'Kurds' and 'Kurdistan' along with restricting the rights of other non-Turkish minorities in hopes of creating an

‘indivisible’ country of one people with one language under one flag. This repression continues under current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has centralized power to an extent unparalleled since the beginning of the multi-party system in the modern Republic of Turkey.

In modern times, the Kurds continue to have their cultural and political identities denied and suppressed. Since the failed coup attempt in 2016 which claimed at least 240 lives, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has cracked down on dissent by arresting more than [50,000](#) soldiers, journalists, lawyers, police officers, academics, and Kurdish politicians. Erdogan’s Party of Justice and Development (AKP) party has removed hundreds of thousands of [government officials](#) including democratically elected co-mayors and replaced them with party loyalists. This purge of dissidents began in 2015 before the 2016 coup attempt because of disagreements between Erdogan and exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen. [Allegations of corruption](#) in the highest levels of the AKP including even Erdogan’s family appeared online, and Erdogan acted quickly to purge Gulenists whom he and his party believed were responsible for the leaks and allegations. Those not purged in 2015 were kept on a watchlist for being a part of the so-called “[Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Group/Parallel state structure](#)”, and this watchlist formed the basis for the purge of over 100,00 lawyers, judges, security officials, and civil servants following the failed coup attempt.. The AKP has come under international scrutiny

for violating human rights, operating an [‘empty process’](#) in which evidence does not matter, only suspicions matter. There is also a concern that the scope of the purge will expand to anyone who opposes the AKP and Erdogan, and some Western observers argue that Erdogan orchestrated the failed coup attempt in order to justify centering his [authoritarian rule](#). Erdogan has reason to fear loss of his position to opposition parties; in 2015, Erdogan and the AKP briefly lost their parliamentary majority because of the surprising electoral success of the pro-Kurdish, progressive Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), and, more recently, in 2019, the AKP lost the mayorship of Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city, and Ankara, its capital. In both Istanbul and Ankara, cities with sizable Kurdish minority populations, the HDP decided not to field candidates, with some HDP voters presumably supporting the candidates from the Republican People’s Party (CHP) who ultimately defeated those of the incumbent AKP. Analysis shows that [911,000 votes out of the 4.6 million](#) that Ekrem Imamoglu, Mayor of Istanbul, received were HDP votes. The HDP, in response to increased state violence against the Kurds under AKP rule, endorsed CHP candidates in major [western Turkish cities](#).

According to M. [Selahattin Esmer](#), the purge is “not about getting coup plotters...It’s about cleansing the country”. This is why the Kurdish minority did not escape the purge of 2016 or the military occupation of Kurdish towns in 2015. The stance of the Kurds on the coup attempt is well documented and unambiguous.

There are no reasons to suspect that the Kurds or the HDP would support any coup attempt, let alone one led by Gulenists. First, the HDP was one of the first political parties to condemn the coup attempt. Secondly, Fethullah Gulen and his supporters often advocated for Erdogan to be more [aggressive](#) in his handling of the Kurds, and Gulen himself is extremely unpopular in the Kurdish region of Turkey.

Following the coup, the pro-Kurdish [HDP](#) came out against the purge, and now is being sidelined by Erdogan's government. The HDP office was [raided in August 2016](#) and its co-leaders were indicted on terrorism charges in a move that is supposedly unrelated to the coup along with [eleven](#) other Kurdish members of parliament. The purge of Kurdish officials was massive and targeted at Kurdish individuals who held social or political power, in total the purge led to [30](#) Kurdish co-mayors being removed, [11,000](#) teachers being removed, and [20](#) Kurdish media outlets being shut down. Kurdish school teachers, healthcare workers, and government officials were suspended from their jobs following the coup because they attended Gulenists schools (often the only schools available to them in the less developed parts of Turkey) or for alleged association with Gulenist politicians. This process continues and in 2019 more than [48 elected HDP co-mayors](#) were removed from their posts by the Turkish government and replaced with AKP loyalists. These removals [rapidly](#) increased following Turkey's military incursions into Syria and Iraq. Two officials who were removed from their positions, Nihat

Kiratli and Fatma Yildizhan, believe they were suspended for protesting the [Turkish military occupation](#) of Kurdish cities and villages in 2015. The Turkish launched military campaigns in these Kurdish majority towns following Erdogan's unilateral withdrawal from negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Initially, [experts believed](#) that Erdogan was renewing the conflict in order to solidify the AKP's position before elections. Turkish military operations and the PKK's response led to dozens of Kurdish areas becoming [bloody battlefields](#). Among these regions is the historic district of [Sur](#) in Amed (Diyarbakir), a World Heritage Site with over a thousand years of history, that was destroyed by Turkish military attacks. Sur was home to most well preserved and oldest historic buildings dating all the way back to 350AD, though many of these historic sites have been [destroyed or damaged](#) in the conflict along and thousands of civilians being [displaced](#). In total, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been [displaced](#) because of the revived conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, with nearly [150 civilians](#) killed by Turkish artillery and airstrikes. IMC TV, a Kurdish media outlet, was shut down following the coup, but many believe the Turkish government was already going to shut down IMC TV because they were reporting that the Turkish government is killing civilians in its fight against the PKK.

The crackdown on Kurds is not limited to Turkey's domestic politics, even though it is the core component of Erdogan's political agenda. Erdogan has expanded his campaign against the Kurds to Iraq and Syria. In Syria, Turkey launched operations "Olive Branch" and "[Peace Spring](#)" in 2018 and 2019 respectively to eliminate the Kurdish who defeated ISIS along Turkey's border with Syria. While these Syrian Kurdish forces gave thousands of lives in the battle against ISIS and have never attacked Turkey, Erdogan and his AKP brand them "terrorists". The Turkish military and Turkish-backed militias invaded, occupied, and looted the city of Afrin which was previously protected by the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) and allied forces. In these Turkish-occupied areas, there has been [widespread abuse, violence, and criminality](#), especially against Kurdish civilians. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) has engaged in a litany of [abusive](#) practices including the beating and execution of Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf, and they continue to occupy large swaths of territory in Syria along the Turkish border and elsewhere. The SNA itself has documented many of their war crimes [including videos](#) of themselves committing summary executions, mutilating corpses, rape, threats against Kurdish civilians, and widespread looting. [Bassem al-Ahmed](#) of the Syrians for Truth and Justice stated that "what is going on now in Afrin is a deep ethnic cleansing from which Turkey and the brigades profit financially as well". Many of these abuses were targeted at

women, with more than 228 cases of kidnappings and countless cases of rape, threats of rape, so-called “virginity testing”, and many other forms of sexual violence. The majority of female victims were Kurdish in ethnicity, and some of them were members of the Yazidi minority according to a [UN commission](#). The situation in Afrin is a template for what Turkish-backed militias are doing across Syrian Kurdistan, and what they hope to continue with the backing of the Turkish state and military elsewhere in the region. Erdogan’s government has reportedly broken its [1987 agreement](#) with Iraq and Syria to not decrease the flow of the Euphrates River to below 500 cubic meters per second –current flow from the Euphrates is around 200 cubic meters per second due to Turkey’s interference. This has put [millions of civilians](#) at risk due to water insecurity. The damage caused by Turkey limiting the flow of the Euphrates is multifarious because it disrupts agriculture, electricity, access to potable water, along with a multitude of other issues.

Similarly in Iraq, Turkey has initiated cross-border military operations in areas administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with the stated goal of wiping out the PKK. However, these large scale operations seem to have another objective as well – to expand and solidify Turkish military presence in Iraq. The PKK has operated out of the mountainous region of southeast Turkey and northern Iraq for many years. To date, the Turkish armed forces have constructed at

least [40](#) military and intelligence bases across northern Iraq to expand military operations in the region and with this Turkey has created an 8-mile wide militarized zone in Iraqi Kurdistan. [Several Kurdish villages](#) in Iraq have been evacuated because of indiscriminate Turkish airstrikes. The Turkish military is using scorched earth tactics including the looting and destruction of [valuable agricultural land and woodlands](#) in order to further disrupt the economic, political, and social lives of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thousands of Kurdish civilians have been [uprooted](#) by Turkish military operations, leaving entire valleys empty of Iraqi or Kurdish civilians. Turkish forces are not allowing Kurdish civilians to [return](#) to their villages, a move that hints at full and long lasting Turkish occupation. The Turkish occupation of both Syria and Iraq is part of Erdogan's wider goal of [ethnically cleansing](#) the region by emptying the lands east of the Euphrates of Kurds, Christians, and other minorities.

Erdogan is now contending with a political crisis far greater than that of his fallout with Fetullah Gulen, facing the brunt of criticism for a struggling economy. A recent poll by [Metropoll Research](#) found that Erdogan's approval rating was 38.6%, his lowest since 2015, and his AKP's approval rating was at 27%, also reflecting a large decline. In 2021, Turkey experienced a free-falling currency and rising inflation caused by the government's failed monetary policy. The average price of consumable goods has risen more than [36%](#) and has affected every person

in Turkey. The lira's value has declined [46%](#) against the dollar since last year. Although the GDP is expected to grow [9%](#) this year, inequality has become the main concern of opposition parties, business groups, and other groups in Turkey. The [price of housing](#) is increasing because construction materials now cost more due to the decline of the lira. An estimated [62%](#) percent of bank deposits in Turkey are now held in foreign currencies. Erdogan's government has cut [interest rates](#) [four](#) different times, defying basic monetary theory, which has only worsened inflation in the country and is further weakening Turkey's economy. The effects of the failing economy have hit the working poor and middle class the hardest. The recent economic turmoil has especially hurt the Kurdish regions of Turkey because they are [significantly less developed](#) than the rest of the country. There is some belief that Erdogan is attempting to grow the economy through a contraction. A contraction devalues the Turkish exports and causes an increased demand for tourism and Turkish services because the currency also declines in value. This allows the state to rely on the export sector and tourism which could lead to a boom in the economy. However, the Turkish people are not satisfied with Erdogan's promises of economic renewal and, [in November](#), protestors called for a change in government due to the growing economic crisis. The income level and quality of life created during the nearly two decades of Erdogan's leadership have disappeared, causing those who once supported Erdogan to [turn away](#).

The growing dissatisfaction with the government and the struggling economy has led Erdogan to reach out to former adversaries to mend relations. Top Turkish and Syrian officials [met in Moscow](#) for the first time in years after years of conflict over the Syrian Civil War and Turkey's intense involvement in the conflict. The two governments discussed containing the Syrian Civil War and how to address the autonomous region in North and East Syria administered by the Kurds and their allies. Both governments discussed "[the possibility of working together against the YPG](#)". Turkey's newfound desire to make amends with a regime it targeted for destruction in a country is a consequence of the Turkish state's maintained focus on its primary objective, preventing any empowerment whatsoever of the Kurds. Similarly, a weakened Erdogan is attempting to mend his relations with Egypt a longstanding rival in the Mediterranean, and Israel. At present, Egypt and Turkey support opposite sides in the Libyan Civil War, and their relationship became even more tenuous after the Egyptian military ousted [President Mohammed Mursi](#), an ally of Erdogan, in 2013. Recently, the two countries' intelligence networks revealed that Ankara has asked for a meeting with Cairo to [discuss](#) "economic, political and diplomatic cooperation". This is by no means a formal sign of resumed diplomacy, but it shows there is an effort on Turkey's end to repair frayed relationships with its neighbors. Turkey and the UAE have had the most measurable increase in diplomatic relations in recent years. The

two countries have long been involved in a c standoff because of political differences in their foreign policy and in their battle for [religious soft power](#), [supporting](#) opposite sides in the Libyan Civil War and rival forces in the Syrian Civil War, causing [havoc](#) in these countries. However, Erdogan and UAE President Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan have recently worked towards normalizing their diplomatic relationships with a [\\$10 billion dollar investment plan](#). This investment, which [reinforced economic ties between the countries](#), was badly needed by Turkey because of their struggling economy and may provide a lifeline for Erdogan's low approval ratings. The Crown Prince of the UAE also visited Turkey last year, his first trip to the country since 2012. This is a part of Erdogan's broader goal of [normalizing](#) relations with powerful Gulf states like Saudi Arabia.

It is important to remember that, in times of crisis, the Turkish government makes a scapegoat out of the Kurdish people. The Kurdish regions of Turkey have historically received substantially less in [developmental investment](#) compared to the rest of the country. And according to [Sinem Adar](#), a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, "political parties in Turkey, except HDP, easily unite when it comes to the Kurdish issue... the perception 'Turkey is under existential threat' is broadly shared by political actors". In other words, the AKP and Turkish opposition parties rally around the Kurdish issue, especially in times of crisis. Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring were widely

popular across all of Turkey, with opposition parties and even sports clubs and businesses expressing their support. The AKP's Islamist neo-Ottoman policies have led to them [instrumentalizing](#) minorities in order to garner broader support for their actions. This has allowed Erdogan to build massive support domestically for his domestic and foreign policies even when those policies are failing. Following the coup in 2016, Erdogan swiftly villainized the Kurdish population and laid the responsibility of the coup at their feet despite their swift condemnation of the coup attempt, which was issued before it had failed. He argued that the Kurds were the '[new Lawrences](#)', after British Army officer T.E. Lawrence who was responsible in World War I for multiple uprisings against the Ottomans, in order to further alienate the Kurdish populations.

This is a part of the AKP's broader, longstanding policy approach to dealing with minority populations. The AKP will often push [conspiracy theories](#) about various minority groups, especially the Kurds, in order to distract the electorate from their failing policies. Erdogan and the AKP's approval ratings are at all-time lows, and the economic crisis is threatening to completely overturn the current political structure. The economic and foreign struggles of Turkey combined with the fact that the Turkish government historically has pushed its failures onto minority groups means that the ultra-nationalist alliance in Turkey will further scapegoat, persecute, and brutalize minorities, especially the Kurds, because much

of their ongoing foreign policy is centered around the Kurds and the alleged existential threat they present. The AKP will attempt to blame the country's issues on minority groups in order to distract the electorate from its policy failures. The scapegoating of minority groups has already started. The AKP is helping propagate rumors that [Syrian refugees](#) in Turkey are responsible for the country's economic woes. Opposition groups in Turkey argue that Erdogan's attempts to focus the national discussion on Turkey's foreign involvement against threats like the Kurds are being done as a distraction to [deflect public opinion](#) from the failing economy. Ultimately, Erdogan and the AKP will use any [means necessary](#) in order to hang onto power, including crushing internal dissent, launching new wars, and promoting ethnic cleansing in Syria and Iraq.

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