The political and security situation in Turkey is becoming increasingly worrying as it deteriorates behind a jumble of acronyms that few could possibly hope to understand. Were it not for the associated terror facing millions of Turks, Kurds and Syrians, it might seem comical. Sadly, however, there is nothing remotely amusing about this particular alphabet soup.

A prime example of how misleading headlines, confusing language and loosely employed acronyms was evident on August 12, 2015, when the UK Newspaper The Telegraph published the following:

"Turkey suffered one of its bloodiest days in recent weeks on Monday as Kurdish insurgents launched deadly attacks in different parts of the country, including the US consulate in Istanbul, killing nine people and leaving 11 wounded in ensuing clashes with Turkey security services."

The fact that the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul and certain others tracks were actually carried out by a leftist group, the DHKP-C, is then outlined, but the reader is easily left with the impression that the PKK and the DHKP-C are both Kurdish separatist groups, or at least a close allies. This is simply not the case, but most readers of this article will not realise that Kurds have very different objectives and methods of operation from the DHKP-C, and as a result, the flames of broader anti-Kurdish sentiment will be fanned.

The descent of Turkish media coverage into confusion amidst dozens of acronyms, which are doubly hard to comprehend for foreigners (since the translations do not necessarily match the original Turkish or Kurdish or English acronym) coupled with unpronounceable words and names is deliberate and no laughing matter. The plight of the Kurds amidst all of this is a perfect example. If we look at the terms we find in articles about the Kurds, the acronym "PKK" immediately appears in the forefront, but its context is rarely explained. Examining acronyms from headlines helps understand at least one key element of an equation that draws in political parties, separatist groups and the Syrian conflict: the Kurds. It is merely the tip of the iceberg, but at least it might assist readers in comprehending the impact of poorly defined acronyms and foreign terms on the situation.

A few key terms that apply to the immediate Kurdish problem, Syria and politics in Turkey are: AKP, Erdogan, HDP, CHP, PKK, Öcalan, DHKP/C, MHP, YPG and ISIS/ISIL. Below is a breakdown of what they mean in today's news.

**AKP or "Justice and Development Party":** The AKP is the Islamist party of both Turkish President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu. Since coming to power in 2002, it has completely changed Turkey's role as a fervent secular NATO and Israeli ally and contender for EU membership into an openly pro-Islamic, outspoken critic of Israel that can no longer be relied upon by NATO to support the West's agenda. There are serious allegations that Turkey's current AKP government has supported and continues to funnel aid to Syrian rebels linked to mass human rights atrocities. The AKP's leading figure, initially Prime Minister and now President Erdogan, has managed to systematically destroy the secular nature of Turkey's government, de-fang the once formidable military guarantor of secularism, and change the Turkish constitution accordingly. These changes have come about in an atmosphere of
severe paranoia and corruption characterised by arrests and convictions of political, military and media opponents based on ludicrous evidence, ruinous fines against those not subject to imprisonment and mysterious deaths of anyone suspected of challenging Erdogan. In spite of allegations of widespread corruption, the AKP managed to earn 49.83% of seats, an impressive win but just short of the 50% majority Erdogan was counting upon winning. Though temporarily hamstrung by AKP’s lack of an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, President Erdogan is still bound and determined to further change Turkish constitutional law to concentrate political power in the hands of the President. For this reason, Prime Minister Davutoglu will not act independently of Erdogan, regardless of what the media might suggest. Therefore, focusing on Erdogan simplifies the ability to understand the Turkish political and security environment, since his word is the final word.

The HDP or “People's Democratic Party”: The HDP is a left-leaning party, associated with Kurdish support, that shocked everyone in June 2015 by winning 13% of the popular vote, thereby undercutting Erdogan’s plans to win a landslide victory. Any Turkish political party that wins less than 10% of the vote loses all its votes to be divided among the parties that have won at least 10% of the vote. Erdogan did not expect non-Kurdish voters to join with Kurdish voters in HDP and create a force with which the AKP now has to contend. Still, the HDP only won 13% of the vote, so if Erdogan can either find an excuse to outlaw the HDP party or divert just 4% of HDP voters to any other political parties, he stands a good chance of crossing the 50% majority threshold. Erdogan is therefore determined to destroy HDP voter support so the AKP can win a clear majority in a “snap” election. To do so, Erdogan needs to demonise Turkey's Kurds as terrorists and HDP voters as terrorist sympathisers.

The CHP or “Republican People’s Party”: As the party most closely famously associated with Atatürk, the CHP is the oldest surviving party in Turkey, but to say “the writing is on the wall” for it may be more than just a bad pun. The CHP is secularist and represents the largest opposition party to AKP, winning 26% of parliamentary seats in June 2015. That 26% offers little leverage in modern Turkish politics, since it cannot exclude the AKP from government without the support of both the pro-Kurdish HDP and the rabidly nationalist, anti-Kurdish MHP (see below). The CHP is foundering and could well be dealt a death blow if Erdogan's AKP were to win an outright majority in a future “snap” election. In an effort to play for time and survival, the CHP is reportedly in talks with AKP leaders over forming a coalition government to avoid a new election, but the CHP’s role in such a government would be very weak and unlikely to survive more than a few months, let alone years. Erdogan is allowing his party to pursue talks with the CHP for now, but most observers hold out little hope of the CHP being able to restrain Erdogan from achieving his ambition to achieve a sole majority and change the constitution and grant himself unassailable new presidential powers.

The PKK or “Kurdistan Worker's Party”: The PKK has never been allowed to hold seats in Turkey's parliament, being classified as a terrorist organisation by many countries, including the United States. Still, all pro-Kurdish politicians in Turkey are treated as being affiliated with the PKK and thus operate under a perpetual cloak of suspicion and threat of prosecution for terrorist ties. Over many decades, the PKK has avoided targeting U.S. personnel to deter the U.S. from supporting Turkish anti-Kurdish military operations. The results for Turkey's Kurds have been murky, as the US continues to classify the PKK as a terrorist organisation while calling on Turkey to refrain from military operations against the “Turkish Kurds”, in spite of all Turkish Kurds being routinely classified by the Turkish government as de facto PKK supporters. The AKP has benefitted politically from hopeful voters seduced by government announcements of ceasefires in the Kurdish conflict, supported by public statements of former and current PKK leaders. Unfortunately, such publicly touted ceasefires simply do not translate into reality for Turkey's Kurdish population and violence invariably flares up into renewed conflict which is then used cynically by the AKP to justify brutal anti-terrorist crackdowns and prosecution of pro-Kurdish opposition politicians and journalists.

Öcalan, pronounced "UHJ ah LAN": Abdullah Öcalan was a founder of the PKK and its recognised leader for two decades until his arrest in 1999. He spent many years based in Syria, to the great annoyance of the Turkish government. During this time, Öcalan reportedly learned Kurdish, a language that had been banned in Turkey, and became the face of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. His original death sentence in 1999 was commuted to life in prison, where he has languished on an island for 16 years. It seems unrealistic to assume that Öcalan still commands the authority over Turkish Kurds that he once did, but Erdogan has used Öcalan repeatedly for political purposes. Öcalan has publicly supported AKP calls for ceasefires from his prison cell, but the extent of his influence at this point is in question. The fact that his positive response to Erdogan's requests to call for PKK ceasefires seems tied to his personal demands for health care and eventual release is almost certainly not lost on the Kurdish public living under Turkish rule. Öcalan remains a hero to many Turkish Kurds but he has been cut off from the actual situation on the ground for so long that even those who respect him are not likely to follow his declarations blindly.
The DHKP/C or "Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front": The DHKP/C is a left-wing terrorist group that is a declared enemy of the Turkish government and all its allies. Formerly known as "Dev Sol", it has claimed responsibility for multiple murders and suicide bombings over the past three decades. Although like the PKK, DHKP/C is known to receive support from Syria, it is an ideologically-based, as opposed to ethnically-based, group that does not share the same objectives as the PKK. DHKP/C's wanton acts of terror have raised fears among Turks and foreigners alike, and have become politically useful to Erdogan of late. The public is prone to erroneously assuming the PKK and DHKP/C are branches of a single terrorist group based on documented Syrian government support for both DHKP/C and the PKK, as well as misreading its acronym, which is not only easily confused with the completely unrelated pro-Kurdish "DHP" but also contains a useful "K", which falsely suggests it might mean "Kurdish". In the confusion following frightening terror attacks, few people bother to question false assumptions and assertions that the DHP and the Kurds are behind the acts of terror being perpetrated by the DHKP/C. This confusion is of great use to Erdogan in both discrediting the DHP and in convincing Western allies to turn a blind eye to Turkish government atrocities against the Kurds.

The MHP or "Nationalist Movement Party": The MHP is an ultra-nationalist, right-wing, anti-Kurdish party that currently holds the remaining approximately 17% of parliamentary seats. The MHP is acting more as a spoiler for the other three parties than anything else these days, as it watches the Kurds bear the brunt of the pain resulting from the absence of an elected Turkish government, but the AKP also arguably stands to gain from MHP troublemaking. While MHP’s views diverge sharply from the AKP’s in many areas, it is gleeeful over the latest government crackdown on the Kurds in both Turkey and Syria. On the domestic political front, MHP is also using an AKP-CHP coalition that would be almost certainly deeply humiliating for its rival CHP and ultimately doomed to fail.

The YPG or "People's Protection Units" and ISIS/ISIL or "Islamic State": The YPG is a Syrian-based Kurdish militia that has been instrumental in the effort to drive ISIS/ISIL out of Syrian areas near the Turkish border. While one might think Erdogan would consider the YPG an ally, he has instead condemned them and complicated their anti-ISIS/ISIL operations. Erdogan’s undermining of the Syrian YPG is being decried by many as evidence that Erdogan indeed supports ISIS/ISIL's horrific acts of terror in both Syria and Iraq. Even the U.S. is bewildered and expressing tentative concerns that Erdogan is only allowing U.S. military operations out of Incirlik Air Force Base against ISIS/ISIL targets to distract attention from Erdogan's clandestine support of ISIS/ISIL and attacks in the Kurds. Credible reports allege that more than 90% of Turkish air strikes against ISIS/ISIL are actually aimed at Kurdish targets in Syria, complimented by robust anti-PKK ground operations inside Turkey itself.

The main lesson from this primer is that Erdogan is cleverly capitalising on mass confusion among the public, both domestic and international, to further his own political agenda. While ISIS/ISIL and non-PKK domestic terrorism pose the most serious threat to both the Turkish public and Turkey's traditional allies, somehow Erdogan is succeeding in using this crisis not only to advance his own dictatorial aspirations but also to crush Kurds inside and outside Turkey with relative impunity. Meanwhile ISIS/ISIL continue to wage violent wars in Syria and Iraq despite formidable military efforts involving Iran, Iraq, Syria, the U.S., supposedly with the full support of Turkey, which is proudly credited with having NATO's second-largest standing military, almost 500,000 men strong. It is difficult to understand how Turkish military efforts against ISIS/ISIL along Turkey's own border could be so ineffectual, given Turkey's military might, unless there is a lack of will on the part of Erdogan to attack ISIS/ISIL. Still, Turkish active, large-scale military operations are ongoing, suggesting that the Kurds, rather than ISIS/ISIL, may be bearing the brunt of Turkey's military might. Meanwhile, as average Turks and others struggle to stay afloat in this alphabet soup, even non-Kurds who dare to question, challenge or criticise Erdogan's actions risk arrest, ruinous fines or worse.

As for the PKK, the very fact that the same term we most commonly recognise as representing Turkish Kurds is an actually internationally recognised terrorist group says it all. How can any party or advocacy group for Kurdish rights in Turkey slip past the PKK terrorist label when even those who support the millions of non-terrorist Turkish Kurds are forced to fall back on the PKK moniker in discussing those non-terrorist Kurds? When a pro-Kurdish party like the HDP manages to do so, it finds instantly itself in the crosshairs of Erdogan's AKP as well as ultra-nationalist MHP troublemakers, and its leaders are threatened with prosecution and lengthy prison sentences. As long as the stage is defined by such confusing and misleading acronyms against a backdrop of terror, corruption and politicking, chances of survival are minimal for any Turkish party that promotes any form of participatory democracy, let alone human rights for Kurds.

For the past 60 years, the West, and indeed most influential Turks themselves, quietly trusted in the secular Turkish military to step in when the political and security scene became untenable. While everyone would publicly condemn
such military intervention, the fact that it was always there as a fallback brought secret solace to supporters of
modern Turkey as envisioned by Atatürk's. Now it appears that a military intervention is no longer an option to
restore traditional order if the situation deteriorates further. Instead, President Erdogan stands ready to change the
constitution and establish a Turkey very different from anything we have seen in our lifetimes. Given what we are
seeing right now in terms of government corruption, disregard for human rights and elimination of all dissent, the
prospect of this new Turkish political landscape, devoid of all but the AKP acronym, justifiably strikes fear into the
hearts of many Turks and non-Turks alike.

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