Turkey at War: Disaster Capitalism in the South-East

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (or AKP) was the first national political player to engage the country's Kurdish minority in a peace process, actively negotiating with the PKK (or the Kurdish Workers' Party) and its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan. But now this process has ground to a halt and the might of Turkey's Armed Forces (or TSK) is crushing down on the Kurdish-populated south-eastern section of Anatolia. But could there be more than meets the eye in this and might there lurk a commercial incentive behind the ongoing conflict and Ankara's policy of collective punishment???

The Turkish-state-as-led-by-the-AKP has been waging all-out war against the PKK ever since the June elections proved unable to produce the desired outcome. In fact, the hostilities began on 24-25 July 2015 when Turkey's Armed Forces (TSK) undertook Operation Martyr Yalçın aimed at PKK and ISIS positions in northern Iraq (KRG) and northern Syria (Rojava). At the end of December 2015, Human Rights Watch noted that "Kurdish civilians, including women, children and elderly residents, have been killed during security operations and armed clashes since July 2015 in southeastern Turkey. Local human rights groups have recorded well over 100 civilian deaths and multiple injuries. After unprecedented military deployments to the region in recent days, several cities are under curfew and some of their neighborhoods the scenes of shelling by the military and heavy clashes with armed Kurdish groups. The civilian death toll is likely to rise steeply." The subsequent imposition of curfews and severe military crackdown amounted to a veritable collective punishment of Turkey's Kurds -- disciplinary actions that has also led to the destruction of numerous buildings and monuments or damaged real estate. The area of Sur, home to many structures of historical importance, in the urban centre of Diyarbakır appears particularly affected in this respect. For example, the Kurşunlu Mosque, dating back to the early sixteenth century, is but one of the many architectural victims of the ongoing conflict. The governor's office even released a public statement indicating that the "terrorists [had] started a fire inside the mosque." In addition, the mosques of Fatihpasha, Arab Sheikh, Hadji Hamid and Hasırlı as well as the Armenian Catholic and Protestant churches have also become subject to the effects of the fighting, with trenches being dug, barricades set up and explosives put in place.

Urban Change in a Time of War

Within the context of the nation-wide programme of Urban Change, propagated by the AKP-led government in Ankara, 330 individual buildings have been demolished in the area of Sur in Diyarbakır since 2010. In view of the numerous protests against this apparently wanton and profit-driven destruction, these controlled demolitions were brought to a halt subsequently. But now that real estate is being destroyed in the course of the ongoing armed conflict, Turkey's State Housing Agency Directorate (or TOKİ, in acronymized Turkish) has come to the fore once more. The pro-government press has come out in full support, brandishing such headlines like "TOKİ on the job again," indicating that the government should step in and "urgently nationalize" the affected structures to implement the AKP-led programme of Urban Change in Diyarbakır. Already in February 2015, Turkey's Ministry for Environment and Urban Planning issued a report appropriately entitled "Urban Change and Diyarbakır." The report deals specifically with the area of Sur within the prefecture of Diyarbakır and proposes the realization of "a comprehensive change" in favour of earlier "localized interventions" or "narrow-scope implementations" in order to accomplish feats of "conservation," "regeneration," and "renewal" in the area. In other words, the Ministry seems to envision a wholesale construction effort that will alter the complete structure and outlook of the area. According to reports in the pro-government Star daily, the project would entail the conservation of 1,000 historical monuments and the construction of 8,000 new houses built in accordance with the historical "atmosphere" of the area. The latter announcement appears to be in total congruity with the AKP's self-avowed love for "architectural replicas, reproductions, copies, and other mass-produced items of oftentimes saccharine nostalgia." Furthermore, the paper
announces that this project will come with a price tag of TL4 billion. In connection with this example of conspicuous urban refurbishment, the Yazidi Kurdish politician Feleknas Uca, an HDP MP from Diyarbakır, asked Turkey's wily Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu in parliament whether there is any linkage between “the [at that stage] 20-day curfew and the ‘Urban Change' that TOKİ has been trying to implement in the Sur area of Diyarbakır [since] 2009 [or rather 2010]?”

**Disaster Capitalism à la Turca**

In her 2007 book The Shock Doctrine, the Canadian writer and activist Naomi Klein popularized the concept of disaster capitalism, apparently originally coined by Antony Loewenstein, and how this notion goes back to the ideas and beliefs of the economist Milton Friedman. The latter wrote down in 1962 that “[o]nly a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. . . . Our basic function [is] to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” As the most important representative of the so-called Chicago School of Economics, Friedman and his ideas have dominated Capitalist society in the latter part of the 20th century and beyond. They have successfully challenged Keynesian economics in the postwar period and ushered in the complete and utter victory of neoliberalism, peaking from General Augusto Pinochet and the “Chicago Boys” in the seventies to the more recent peak formed by catastrophic Bush invasion of Iraq in the early years of this century. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Q8y-4nZP6o] Disaster capitalism and neoliberal policies have become ubiquitous across the world, and particularly in Turkey-under-the-AKP. The ruling AKP has been unrelenting in implementing its own version of neoliberalism in the country, a ruthless approach to the economy that some argue has led to the virtual pillage of Anatolia and its resources for the sake of turning a profit. As a result, much of the Turkish landscape today resembles a building site, as more and more high-rises are going up and green spaces become but cement gardens, peppered with blocks of granite at appropriate intervals. At the same time, the party is steadfastly leading the country down a post-Kemalist path that sees a growing resurgence of Islamic piety and a wholesale propagation of socially conservative norms and values. But underlying this post-Kemalist project lies the so-called “Turkish Miracle” or the AKP's apparent adept handling of the economy, a management that has seen the widespread privatization of state assets and enterprises, the blurring of the line between business and politics and a steady growth in so-called Green Money or Muslim capitalists. In this context, the Harvard professor of international political economy Dani Rodrik has also remarked critically that the real "growth engine of Turkey has been foreign loans, especially in the past couple of years . . . instead of gross domestic savings and an increase in productivity."

**The Kurdish Issue as a Business Opportunity**

The South-East of the country, mainly inhabited by Kurds, has always lagged behind in terms of economic investment and business opportunities. The PKK has been waging a bloody war against the Turkish state for more than 30 years now. At first, this struggle aimed at the creation of an independent Kurdistan in the south-eastern Anatolia, but in time, these separatist demands have become calls for local autonomy and cultural recognition. The AKP was the first political organization in Turkey to officially acknowledge the existence of a Kurdish issue, and the first one to attempt to tackle the deadlock by means of a negotiation process, known as the ‘Kurdish overture' launched in 2009. But following the inconclusive June 2015 elections and Turkey's subsequent November Surprise that saw the AKP receive a veritable mandate for the construction of a post-Kemalist century, Ankara has once again started beating the war drums. Arguably, the AKP leadership seems to have finally come to grips with the fact that the PKK and its leadership have very different ideas about the future of the South-East and Turkey. Whereas, the AKP appears willing “to transform the nation state Turkey into an Anatolian federation of Muslim ethnicities,” the Kurdish faction, on the other hand, envisions quite an alternate reality. The imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, for instance, speaks of a “[d]emocratic confederalism [that] is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars.” Given that the AKP and the PKK clearly occupy opposite sides of the political-ideological spectrum, it seems that, at long last, realism has prevailed and now Ankara appears willing to forcibly impose its own socially conservative and economically neoliberal agenda upon the South-East of the country while crushing the PKK and its armed factions. And the ongoing armed conflict seems to present an ideal opportunity to push through the AKP programme of unbridled construction involving cement and granite in addition to unlimited profits for those involved, while arguably ignoring the people on the ground, particularly the about 100,000 inhabitants of the Sur area. In the first week of this month, Turkey's General Staff announced that a total of about 700 terrorists have been "neutralised" (or rather killed) in the course of the ongoing military operations -- operations that were described as “peace and democracy operations” by the Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş speaking on national television (2 February 2016).
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