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Turkey: Attack on the border with Syria

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The biggest terrorist attack in the history of the Turkish Republic took place on 11 May in Reyhanlı, in Hatay province, close to the border with Syria. Two car bombs exploded, killing 51 people and injuring over 140, and many buildings in the city centre were also damaged. The Turkish government accused the Syrian authorities of ordering the attacks, while blaming Turkish left-wing extremist organisations for the actual attack itself. Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that those responsible for the attacks would be made to pay, although he also stated that Turkey would not get caught up in Syria's civil war. The government in Damascus has rejected the accusations, and has placed all the blame on Ankara, which by its support for the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime has transformed the Turkish-Syrian border region into a "international concentration of terrorism".

The attacks in Reyahnlı have put Erdoğan's government in a difficult position, both domestically and internationally. They could seriously hamper not only the Prime Minister's current domestic initiatives (work on a new constitution, and changing to a presidential system), which are of key importance to the future and his own credibility, but also the country's internal stability, especially in the border regions. The attacks also undermine Turkey's authority as a regional power able to react effectively to the political reality of the situation in its immediate vicinity.

Domestic factors

The attacks have raised the already high levels of tension in Hatay province. It is one of Turkey's most diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion, as it is occupied by Arabs, Turks, Circassians, Kurds, Sunni Muslims, Alawite Muslims and Christians. The influx of Syrian refugees, mostly Sunnis (there are now over 300,000 throughout Turkey, and more than 15,000 in Hatay alone, according to UNHCR data) has sparked decidedly negative reactions. The local people, some of whom sympathise with the Assad regime, see the refugees as terrorists and a threat to their own security.

A further increase in tensions – which will be difficult to avoid given the scale of the attacks, the common belief that the local refugees are responsible, and accusations that the central

government has failed to ensure the province's safety – could lead to the progressive destabilisation of this part of Turkey, which has hitherto been relatively peaceful (against the background of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict which has disrupted Turkey's other south-eastern regions).

The terrorist attacks have intensified the general public's negative attitude towards the Turkish government's policy with respect to Syria. Despite widespread sympathy in Turkey for the Syrian people, the vast majority of the public are opposed to any active involvement by Turkey in Syria, fearing that the country will be caught up in a civil war there, and that the instability could spill over into Turkish territory.

In a situation where Ankara's Syrian policy has not produced measurable results that the government could present as a success, but has in fact brought several failures (such as the loss of an F-4 Phantom last June, repeated firing at towns on the Turkish side of the border, and the terrorist attack at the border crossing with Syria in February), Turkish public opinion may interpret the attacks in Reyhanlı as the realisation of the 'nightmare scenario' of Turkish territory being affected by war. One sign of how much the government fears the public reaction may be the statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said that those who have linked the attacks to the refugees and the government's policy towards Syria are "committing a crime against humanity." Public criticism has also been caused by the Turkish government's hasty statement that responsibility for the attacks lies with the government in Damascus, which is widely seen as an attempt to nip in the bud any suspicion that the anti-Assad opposition may be responsible for the attacks, for political reasons; many people in Turkey see such a version of events as a very possible option.

The events in Reyahnlı took place during a critical period for both the ruling AK party and the Prime Minister personally. Presidential and local elections are to be held next year. After more than a decade of AKP rule Erdoğan still retains strong public support, but at the same time it seems that both the general public and the party are growing tired of his personal domination of Turkish public life and his dictatorial style of governing. The two key political projects he has espoused – changing the constitution to a presidential system (it is an open secret that Erdoğan wants to take up the presidency after the next elections) and his attempt to settle the conflict with the Kurdish guerrillas (which is partly linked to the former) – are facing strong doubt from both the general public and Turkey's political class. Internal destabilisation, increased insecurity and the negative assessment of the Turkish government's policy towards the Syrian conflict are also making the situation more difficult.

External factors

Turkey's Syria policy, both during the period of the AKP government's very good relations with Assad, and since Turkey took the side of the Syrian opposition, was one of the symbols of Turkey's new active policy in the Middle East – an example of its ability to make far-reaching changes to the Turkish foreign policy paradigm, resulting in the country strengthening its position on the international stage. If before the so-called 'Arab spring' Turkish political and economic expansion in the Middle East had been non-confrontational

in nature, its open support for the anti-Assad opposition has now made Ankara a *de facto* party to the regional conflict. Its indirect involvement in the civil war in Syria, and the apparent lack of result from its policies towards the conflict so far, has not only made Turkey vulnerable to retaliation, but has also called into question Turkey's authority as a regional power which can influence the political reality in its immediate vicinity.

The Reyahnlı bombings, as well as the earlier series of lesser incidents, have struck at the government's credibility and brought it into confrontation with growing public opposition to its Syria policy on the one hand; and on the other, increasing demand for clear success in this policy to justify Turkey's grand regional aspirations. Unlike after previous incidents, the government's rhetoric since the attack in Hatay has been more cautious. Unilateral Turkish military action against Damascus would seem to be ruled out because of the size of the risk; any confrontational rhetoric would once again be exposed as hollow. At the same time, however, during Prime Minister Erdoğan's upcoming visit to Washington, DC (on 16 May), he will certainly press for the United States to take decisive action. Simply maintaining the status quo, not to mention the possibility of repeated attacks, would place an ever greater burden on the Turkish government, both domestically and externally.