

In Brief: On January 8, around 1,100 academics (mostly Turkish but more than 300 foreign) issued a statement calling on the government to stop its armed measures to counter PKK actions. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's reaction, soon emulated by the government as a whole, was both unusually strong and problematic. Why did the government choose to move harshly against the signatories and insist that their declaration be met with sanctions? A first argument is that the government has been deeply immersed in dealing with an emergency that, if not terminated, may become an existential question. A rival explanation focuses on the intentions and the purported agenda of the government. Will the government cool down, or will it become more hardline?

AKParty Response to Criticism: Reaction or Over-Reaction?

by Ilter Turan

Turkey's security forces are engaged in a long, drawn out, and patience-testing campaign in several towns in southeastern Turkey, trying to dislodge elements of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that has taken over sections of these towns. Those who get their information either from the newspapers or the evening news — both of which, in large part, rely on officially furnished documents and briefings — very likely have in their minds a picture of PKK irregulars holding the residents of the areas they have seized as hostages. They have dug ditches in the streets to prevent motorized access to homes and other facilities where they have situated themselves. They have set up remote-controlled explosives that can be activated when police or military vehicles cross, often producing casualties. They have driven trucks loaded with explosives into housing complexes where the families of government and security officials live. They have fired at ambulances that have come to take away the wounded, rendering rescue operations difficult and sometimes impossible. They have even thrown hand grenades and fired explosives at schools, presumably to prevent "Turkish education."

Although it is confined to a specific region of the country and distant from major metropolitan centers, the general public perceives the fighting as some kind of war. As opinion has become more and more

polarized, a large majority has both tended to blame the PKK for having brought to an end the peace that had prevailed in the country over the last few years and totally identified with the government's efforts to terminate the PKK challenge through military means. That government actions might have contributed to ending the relative peace, and the possibility that the security forces may have used more force and less carefully than necessary is not even entertained. It is not particularly popular to criticize the security forces or to suggest that a peaceful solution should be sought to bring the conflict to an end. So when on January 8, around 1,100 academics (mostly Turkish but more than 300 foreign) issued a statement calling on the government to stop its armed measures, the reaction of the public, including the government and the president, was immediate and strongly negative. This reaction was exacerbated by fiery language in the statement, calling for an end to what it described as the Turkish government's unilateral use of force against its citizens, and saying that the signatories would not be a party to the government's crime.

It is not unusual for governments or public opinion to get upset with statements from academics. In the middle of a security campaign against a terrorist organization, patience and understanding may be even more difficult to maintain than at other times. But the president's reaction, soon emulated by the government as a whole, was both unusually strong and problematic. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan considered the statement an act of treason and encouraged university administrations and the Council on Higher Education to deal with its authors. He also asked that public prosecutors take note that the signatories had extended support to terrorists. Not surprisingly, the government's stance soon generated further reaction. More than 1,000 academics added their signatures to original the statement as an act of sympathy. Another group of academics, while not expressing an opinion on the contents of the initial statement, drew attention to the fact that expression of ideas was a democratic right and the rights of the signatories should

be respected. Soon, members of foreign academic communities and international professional associations began to issue statements, asking the government to respect the liberties of the signatories, some making additional references to academic freedoms and a peaceful resolution of Turkey's Kurdish problem.

Such developments might have been predicted. If the government had chosen to ignore the statement, there was a good chance that it would not have received as much attention as it did. In a society where the daily political agenda changes very quickly, it could have been forgotten in a few days. Why then, did the government choose to move so harshly against the signatories and insist that their declaration be met with sanctions? Two divergent lines of explanations have been offered.

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The first argument is that the government has been deeply immersed in dealing with an emergency that, if not terminated, may become an existential question. In the final analysis, a terrorist organization must not be allowed to take over sections of towns and run them independently as if a central government does not exist. In the middle of a security campaign, therefore, the government tends to view any criticism as seriously undermining its campaign. The proponents of this view point to the fact that the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, employed a similar strategy to successfully take over the administration of Kobane district, but that the PKK made an error in judgment in thinking that the same strategy could be employed

in Turkey. They failed to appreciate the power of the Turkish state and mistakenly expected all citizens of Kurdish origin to side with them. Some proponents of this argument also add a conspiratorial dimension to the affair, suggesting that the statement was no innocent declaration but part of a carefully crafted, probably international, plan whereby after students came back to campuses from their winter break, large student demonstrations would be incited across the country, extending support to the PKK.

A rival explanation focuses on the intentions and the purported agenda of the government. The defenders of this view dwell on the point that the government announced the suspension of the so-called “Peace Process” in June 2015, the same time as the majority AKParty experienced substantial losses in the parliamentary elections both against the nationalists (MHP) and against the mainly Kurdish ethnic Peoples’ Democracy Party (HDP) in Turkey’s south-east. Losing its parliamentary majority, the AKParty adopted a new strategy to regain its votes and then move to a new election. Accordingly, on one hand, the party adopted a strongly nationalist line to woo those votes that had gone to the MHP. On the other hand, in terminating the peace process, it encouraged voters in the southeast to reconsider their choice of party if they wanted peace to be maintained. Since the HDP was closely identified with the PKK, some voters felt that supporting the HDP would only help bring violence back. The strategy, which appears to have been designed and implemented mainly by Erdoğan, worked. In November, the AKParty returned to government with a substantial parliamentary majority, though somewhat short of 330 that it would need to change the constitution and convert Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Supporters of this argument usually add that the country has already moved into a de facto presidential system despite the presence of constitutional provisions to the contrary, and that the system is becoming more authoritarian. The academicians’ statement provided the government with an opportunity to silence the universities,

one of the few remaining institutions that the government had yet failed to bring under its full control, by showing all that those who criticized government policies would be exposed to sanctions.

Both lines of argument may have their merits and shortcomings in explaining the government’s behavior. The fact, however, is that even under conditions of duress, it is not typical for governments in democratic systems to publicly harass academics and invite administrators and courts to apply sanctions. Several of those who had signed the statement were taken in for questioning by public prosecutors and their homes and offices searched. No arrests have been made, however. The Council on Higher Education, the top administrative body of the Turkish university system, has also asked university administrators to initiate

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disciplinary action against those that have signed the statement. Some enthusiastic university administrators had already started investigations before receiving instructions from the Council. Because the signatories have been university-affiliated individuals, the government’s position has been sometimes criticized for not observing academic freedom. The question is, in fact, not one of academic freedom in the narrow sense, but of the freedom of expression, an unalienable right for all citizens in a liberal democratic system.

The government’s response to the statement has generated significant criticism internationally and raised questions about the nature of the Turkish political system. Many international professional associa-

tions and networks of scholars have issued statements demanding the Turkish government stop procedures initiated against those academics exercising their democratic rights. Similar sentiments have been echoed by global political leaders, including U.S. Vice President Joe Biden on his recent visit to Turkey. So far the government insists that those who had signed the statement had done something wrong and should be sanctioned. Is this a tempest in a teapot, (i.e. the government continues to be upset that it was criticized in the middle of a security campaign, but will eventually cool down) or is it thunder before a storm (i.e. another step in quieting centers of criticism against the government, therefore building a more authoritarian system)? Many intellectuals hope that it is the tempest, but fear that it may be thunder. Only time will tell.

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