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Us against the rest

While Turkish society is deeply divided, a large majority supports the invasion of Northern Syria. How is that possible?

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When Turkish troops crossed into Syria on 6 October 2019, Europe recoiled in horror. It was branded as an 'illegal war of aggression', highly respected media publications wrote of 'Erdogan's war on the Kurds' – in the headlines at least, no distinction was drawn between organisations like the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurds as a people. In response, several European countries imposed an arms embargo on Turkey.

Turkish society on the other hand has put aside its many divisions and pulled together in defiance: footballers are saluting at international matches and pop stars are declaring their solidarity. Even representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities have prayed together for the Turkish soldiers in Syria: 'We are praying and supporting our soldiers as they develop our nation,' said Yusuf Cetin, Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Istanbul. Sunni mosques were already highly supportive. In recent years, few issues have aroused as little dissent in Turkey as the Syrian offensive.

It's too easy to attribute all this to the ruling AKP's propaganda. In fact, this mindset goes back a long way. Erdogan is just tapping into it and using it for his own political ends.

The sense of 'us against the rest' harks back to the founding myth of the Turkish Republic. After defeat in the First World War, the remains of the Ottoman Empire were to be carved up. Vast swathes of the coast of Asia Minor were to be handed over to Greece and Italy, while France was set to take the southeast. All Turkish pupils have long been taught how Kemal Atatürk defied all military odds to beat the Allies in a four-year war and ultimately established a modern, secular state in 1923. Thereafter, strict centralism was meant to prevent any secessionist movements. A strong army has always been in place as a safeguard and

still commands widespread popular respect.

The West and the PKK

A deep-seated distrust of foreign powers shaping the region also stems from that era. Anti-Americanism in particular is deeply rooted in Turkish society and can be mobilised at any time. According to a survey by Kadir Has University in Istanbul last February, 81 per cent of Turks regard the US as 'a threat' and only half the Turkish population believe that the country's membership of NATO is worthwhile.

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Many see President Trump, who actually triggered a financial crisis in Turkey with a couple of tweets in summer 2018, as further proof that secret forces of some kind aim to weaken Turkey.

Furthermore, many Turks feel that the long-standing fight against the 'Kurdistan Workers' Party' (PKK) is misunderstood. Whereas some on the Left in Europe sympathise with the PKK, officially classified as a terrorist organisation, almost all parts of Turkish society broadly agree that the PKK must be defeated – if necessary by military means.

Many Turks feel that the West has not distanced itself from the PKK clearly enough. The generally empathetic reporting on the Kurdish cause in the Western media merely stokes the sense of disaffection.

A cross-party consensus

Turkey's largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), does not contest this narrative. Although its leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu is critical of Erdogan's foreign policy towards Syria and has long been calling for rapprochement with President Assad, he sees the military operation as a necessary action against terrorists.

For decades, it has mainly been Turkey's secular rulers who have advocated a tough anti-Kurdish policy and brutally suppressed Kurdish attempts at self-determination. Ironically, it was the ruling president Erdogan who, in his early years, sought to improve relations with the Kurds.

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By contrast, the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and its offshoot, the Iyi Party, have made every effort to outflank Erdogan on the right. For example, Meral Aksener, leader of the Iyi Party, said of Trump's letter that Erdogan should 'throw it straight in the bin.'

This is another reason why economic sanctions or the Volkswagen Group's announcement that it's reconsidering its plans for a new factory near Izmir generally have little effect. On the contrary, they reinforce the idea that Turkey is surrounded by enemies.

Strengthening civil society

The only hope of changing such narratives lies within Turkish society. Yet the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is the only established party to oppose the military action in Syria. But Erdogan's AKP constantly accuses the HDP of maintaining ties with the PKK.

Canan Kaftancıoğlu, who also ran the election campaign of the new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, is the only voice in the self-proclaimed social-democratic CHP to complain at the treatment of critics of the offensive. 'How can it be that those who defend peace are labelled as traitors?', she asked in Cumhurriyet, a newspaper that supports her party. Around 190 people have been briefly detained in recent days – partly for describing the offensive as a 'war' on social media.

Turkey needs a public debate that also includes a critical reappraisal of the founding years of the Republic and the dismantling of the constitutional state in the recent past. Probably the most tragic aspect of the enthusiasm for war in Turkey is that such a discourse is no longer possible, as the press now almost entirely toes the government line. In recent years, the government has fostered an environment in which conspiracy theories and binary thinking thrive.

So what can the EU do to support this process? There should at least be an awareness that sanctions are usually counterproductive. External pressure entrenches Turks in their belief that their country is surrounded by enemies. Support for Turkish civil society and promotion of dialogue between various social groups will be a more effective approach in the long term.



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