

LEFT-WING MONSTER: ABDULLAH OCALAN

By Soner Cagaptay and Duden Yegenoglu

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Before al-Qaeda's fanatics were blowing themselves up in Iraq, members of Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) were terrorizing Turkey in the 1990s. According to Yoram Schweitzer from the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel, between 1996 and 1999, the PKK carried out sixteen suicide bomb attacks (plus five failed attacks), "killing twenty people and wounding scores." Schweitzer adds that "PKK suicide attacks were inspired and carried out on the orders of the organization's charismatic leader Ocalan, who was perceived by the members of his organization as a 'Light to the Nations.'"[i] Ocalan, also known as Apo, sees himself as a model to be emulated. "Everyone should take note of the way I live and what I don't do," he told the *Turkish Daily News* in 1998. "The way I eat, the way I drink, my orders and even my inactivity should be carefully studied. There will be lessons to be learned from several generations because Apo (Ocalan) is a great teacher."[ii] Like a teacher, Ocalan enjoyed lessons, except he favored bloody ones: in the 1980s, the PKK slaughtered the inhabitants of Kurdish villages in southeastern Turkey who were unsympathetic to its cause in order to coerce other nearby villages into submission. On August 20, 1987, the PKK killed twenty-four inhabitants of the Kilickaya village of Turkey's Siirt province, including fourteen children. The lesson to the villages around Kilickaya was clear: "either you join Apo or you are dead."

Beginnings: From Peasant Kid to Peasant Killer

How did Abdullah Ocalan, a simple peasant from Turkey's southeastern Sanliurfa province, turn into a mass killer? The answer to this question lies in Turkey's leftist movement in the 1970s. At the time, Ocalan was studying in Ankara, at the capital's prestigious School of Political Science, Mulkiye, where most of the country's diplomats were trained. A poor Kurd from rural Turkey attending Mulkiye would have been the best proof to Turkey's integrative powers across class and ethnic lines. This would also have demonstrated the means of upwards mobility available to anyone in Turkey. Yet Ocalan hardly developed a regard for such integrative mechanisms. Instead, under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology popular at Mulkiye and other Ankara universities, he became persuaded that nothing around him was good enough because it was capitalist and imperialist. Ocalan aimed for a revolution to fix the perceived problems resulting from capitalism, and years later was quoted telling the PKK cadres, "You must believe before everything else that the revolution must come, that there is no other choice."[iii]

Even though the burgeoning Marxist-Leninist movement in Ankara did promote revolution through violence, as a committed Maoist the peasant kid from southeastern Turkey did not quite feel at home in Ankara. The capital's leftist literati appeared too soft for Ocalan, whose *weltanschauung* was shaped by his patriarchal upbringing and the orthodox ways of Shafii Islam in Turkey's Kurdish southeast. Rural feudal values and a Maoist obsession with the peasantry determined Ocalan's politics, causing him to drop out of Mulkiye in 1978. He deserted Ankara for southeastern Turkey where he established the PKK with a number of confidantes, including Cemil Bayik, Mazlum Dogan and Kesire Yildirim, the woman in the group, who later wed Ocalan through a "revolutionary vow." The group "condemned the repressive exploitation of the Kurds,"[iv] and called for a revolution to overthrow the system in Turkey. They wanted to set up a "democratic and united Kurdistan" in southeastern Turkey to be governed along

Marxist-Leninist lines.[v] “The fundamental force of the revolution would be a worker-peasant alliance,” in which the proletariat would provide the “ideological, political and organizations leadership.”[vi] Because there was no working class in southeastern Turkey at the time, the area’s population split among majority peasants, minority landowners, and a small urban middle class. Their statement provided Ocalan the role of the missing proletarian vanguard of the revolution, and under his leadership, the peasantry would be the “main force” of the “popular army,” providing the PKK with an exhaustible manpower supply.[vii] Over 30,000 Kurdish peasants would die as a result of this vision.

The First Enemy: Other Kurds

Ocalan’s Marxist-Leninism with its Maoist twist had no patience for other leftist terror groups, even Kurdish ones. Ocalan saw rural southeastern Turkey as his domain and the bedrock of a future Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Kurdish state. Conveniently, Ocalan branded all his Kurdish rivals as fascists and acted to eliminate them. In the late 1970s, the PKK decimated various leftist groups in eastern Turkey, including the Revolutionary Unity of the People (Devrimci Halkin Birligi), the Liberation of the People (Halkin Kurtulusu), the Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Association (DDKD), and the National Liberation of Kurdistan (KUK). Ocalan crushed not only violent groups but also peaceful Kurdish political parties, including Kemal Burkay’s Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK), effectively ending the hopes for peaceful political action among the Kurds.

Ocalan’s lack of tolerance also extended to opposition inside the PKK. Not surprisingly, the group referred to itself as the “Apocus” (Apoists), emphasizing Ocalan’s central role in shaping the PKK’s identity and destiny.

Once he had eliminated all opposition from other Kurdish groups and within the PKK, Ocalan focused on “state collaborators”—Kurds who identified with Turkey. In 1979, the PKK rose to national prominence when it assassinated Mehmet Celal Bucak, a well-known conservative Kurdish politician and a wealthy landowner in eastern Turkey, condemning him as someone who “exploited the peasants.”[viii] It would soon become the PKK’s practice to attack all Kurds who were loyal to Turkey.

Syria Steps in: War by Proxy against Turkey

Ocalan’s aimed to overthrow the Turkish government, and in the polarized world of Cold War politics, this stance earned him the support of the Soviet Union and Syria, a Soviet client state and Turkey’s southern neighbor. PKK cadres were trained in Damascus and Lebanon’s Syrian-held Bekaa Valley by Soviet agents.[ix] In Lebanon, the PKK found yet another ally—Armenian terrorists in the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). After assassinating a number of Turkish diplomats in the 1970s, ASALA had been crippled by Turkish intelligence organizations toward the end of the decade, and it saw the PKK as a useful ally. On April 8, 1980, the PKK and ASALA held a joint press conference in Sidon, Lebanon where they issued a declaration of cooperation. By the end of that year, the two terror groups were already carrying out joint attacks against Turkish targets.[x]

Thanks to this support, by the 1980s the PKK had developed into a well-organized, though small, group. However, the organization was still unable to challenge Turkey, and the September 1980 military coup came as a blessing. Although severe suppression of all terror groups after the coup helped cripple the violence that had wreaked havoc in Turkey in the 1970s, this military rule was also a curse because it suppressed civil liberties in Turkey. All this, combined with various unpopular bans—including a ban on

Kurdish music—led to frustration in southeastern Turkey. Taking advantage of these circumstances, the PKK organized its second congress at Ayn al Hulwah in Lebanon on August 20–25, deciding on the strategy of armed attacks to “control the heavily Kurdish populated region in southeastern Turkey.”[xi]

The PKK’s anticipated onslaught came on August 15, 1984, soon after Turkey reverted to democracy. Well-coordinated PKK twin attacks on the provincial towns of Erüh and Semdinli on a hot summer day shocked the entire country. Dozens of PKK terrorists participated in the attacks in broad daylight. The daring style of the incidents led to a massive backlash against the PKK, and Turkey responded with sheer force. Although this strategy kept the organization in check, the PKK maintained a steady stream of attacks across the country’s porous borders using its bases in Syria and Iran.

Throughout the 1980s, the PKK continued to base their actions on Ocalan’s conviction that mass support could be secured only through violence. In addition to the villages raided and village populations slaughtered, many Kurdish peasants were unwillingly forced to become PKK apprentices.

L’état c’est moi—I Am the State

In the meantime, Ocalan launched a strategy of targeting government services in the region. Between 1984 and 1997, the PKK kidnapped and killed 217 teachers by shooting, hanging, or suffocating them.[xii] The group also burned hundreds of rural schools, destroying the entire rural education system. By the end of the 1990s, over 3,600 schools had closed in the region and an estimated 100,000 students were annually unable to receive education. The illiteracy rates in southeastern Turkey that skyrocketed as a result of this development remain high even today.

The PKK also began burning medical clinics and killing doctors and nurses, which subsequently caused the healthcare system in southeastern Turkey to buckle. The group destroyed power stations, railways, and bridges, sabotaged phone switches, and burned road-building equipment. As state services collapsed and disappeared, Kurdish peasants in southeastern Turkey found themselves in Ocalan’s hands. On November 12, 1987, when the PKK raided the Yogurtcular village in the Sirnak province and choked the school’s teacher with metal wire, PKK members told the villagers, “The teachers . . . who do not cooperate with us will no longer be able to work. You will do your military service for us, or else we will kill you.”[xiii]

By 1987, casualties resulting from PKK violence totaled 454 people.[xiv] However, the worst was yet to come—over 30,000 casualties during the 1990s.

Dramatic Opportunities for Ocalan

The year 1990 ushered in two important changes: the fall of communism and the first Gulf War. Ocalan used both developments to his advantage. First, he switched the PKK’s base ideology from communism to Kurdish nationalism. This was ironic because as a dogmatic Marxist-Maoist ideologue, Ocalan had attacked nationalism as fascism. The end of communism also meant Ocalan could flirt with Islam. With his Soviet patron no longer lurking around, Ocalan adopted a Muslim outlook for the PKK, taking advantage of Islam’s appeal to conservative Kurds.

Ocalan also used a second post-1990 development to his benefit when Washington established the no-flight zone in northern Iraq following the Gulf War. The no-flight zone aimed to take northern Iraq out

of Saddam Hussein's hands and to provide the Iraqi Kurds with a safe haven. However, it enabled Ocalan to establish the PKK in northern Iraq. The two Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), controlled this region after 1991 and were unwilling to take action against the PKK. Therefore, parts of northern Iraq became a no-man's land with PKK bases. The group could now launch cross-border operations into Turkey. What followed was an unprecedented rise in PKK violence in Turkey.

Initially, Turkey attempted to reign in the violence. In April 1993, Ankara agreed to a tacit ceasefire with the PKK. For a while, the country was peaceful again. However, Ocalan was not satisfied with Ankara's pace in meeting his political demands, and reverted to violence with spectacular brutality. On May 24, PKK terrorists stopped an intercity bus in Turkey's Bingol province along the Euphrates River, dragged thirty-three unarmed conscripts out of the bus, and shot them in cold blood. The PKK continued to unleash an episode of unimaginable violence; 330 people died in the two weeks following the bus ambush.[xv]

The group also launched massive operations into Turkey from northern Iraq. Sometimes hundreds of terrorists would conduct a foray into Turkish territory, ambush a police station or village, kill dozens of people, and withdraw into northern Iraq. This strategy dramatically increased casualties, and thousands of people perished in the 1990s. Intimidated by the group's newfound strength, more Kurdish peasants were forced into subservience to the organization. As the battle against the PKK transformed into a cross-border fight, Turkey launched massive military operations into the no-man's land of northern Iraq. Ankara also acted began acting with force to cut off the PKK's rural support base inside Turkey.

Turkey Says "Enough"

Even with the high cost in lives, these steps brought the Turkish military close to victory over the PKK. However, it was clear that Turkey would not be able to defeat the PKK so long as the group's main sponsor, Syria, continued to shelter the organization. It had become known by the 1990s that Ocalan lived in Syria and the PKK received training inside Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon. In fact, Ocalan was so comfortable in his Damascus home that he gave an on-site interview to a Washington-based journal in early 1998.[xvi] Nevertheless, Syria repeatedly denied Ocalan's presence in Damascus. Only when Turkey finally showed it meant business did Damascus respond. After a diplomatic campaign against Damascus in 1998, Ankara massed troops on the Syrian border and the Turkish Chief of Staff threatened the country with war. Soon after, Turkish newspapers came out with headlines saying "We will soon say *shalom* to the Israelis on the Golan Heights," and Damascus kicked Ocalan out.

Russia and Europe Support Ocalan

What followed was an ordeal involving Russia and a number of European countries. After being driven out of Syria, Ocalan went to Russia, his first patron. Even though on November 5, 1998, the Russian parliament passed a motion to provide him with political asylum, Russian president Boris Yeltsin, under pressure from Turkey and the United States, refused to allow Ocalan to remain in Russia.

Ocalan then turned to Europe. By the 1980s and 1990s, a pro-PKK Kurdish diaspora was well established in a number of European countries. A skilled tactician, Ocalan had abused the lax counterterror laws, naïve idealism, and occasional self-serving foreign policy calculations of the Europeans to establish the PKK inside Europe. By the late 1990s, the PKK had recruitment and

propaganda centers in most European countries, including Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and Greece.[xvii] Ocalan now relied upon this network. On November 13, he left Russia for Italy, where the communist government of Massimo d'Alema greeted him with open arms. However, due to an Interpol warrant out for Ocalan, Italian police arrested him. Although Rome refused to extradite him to Turkey, after Turkish diplomatic pressure and threats of a boycott on Italian goods and businesses, Italy did send Ocalan back to Russia. Ocalan's communist and leftist allies inside Europe hurriedly searched for a permanent home for him, and Ocalan ended up in Greece. However, on January 22, 1999, Turkey issued a warning to Greece that "granting asylum to Ocalan would be regarded as a hostile act,"[xviii] and on February 2, Athens shipped Ocalan off to Kenya. The Greek Ambassador met Ocalan at the Nairobi Airport, using his diplomatic privileges to whisk him through Kenyan customs. It helped that Ocalan was carrying a Greek Cypriot passport issued for Mavros Lazaros, "a Greek Cypriot journalist with strong links to Ocalan's PKK."[xix]

In his new home, Ocalan acted with bravado, using his cell phone and going out of the embassy premises for walks. Thanks to U.S. assistance, this audacity resulted in the Turkish discovery of his whereabouts. The *Washington Post* tells the rest of the story: on February 16, "Ocalan left the Greek Embassy in Nairobi believing that Greek officials had guaranteed his safe passage to Europe. . . . A squad of Turkish agents finally arrested him as he was being escorted by Greek diplomats and Kenyan authorities to the airport in Nairobi, thinking he would be boarding a flight for Amsterdam. The Turkish agents swiftly handcuffed and blindfolded Ocalan; the most wanted man in Turkey, strapped him to a seat inside a sleek corporate jet borrowed from a Turkish businessman and flew him back to Turkey."[xx]

Not the End

Ocalan's trial started on May 31. Hoping to avoid a death sentence, he presented himself as a law abiding citizen and peace lover interested in finding a political solution to the Kurdish issue. The PKK even declared a unilateral ceasefire to avoid Ocalan's execution. None of this helped. On June 29, 1999, the court sentenced him to death. Just as Ocalan seemed to be finished, Turkey's lingering European Union (EU) membership process came to his aid. In December 1999, the EU, which had stated in 1997 that Turkey was not suitable for union membership, declared it had changed its mind. If Turkey satisfied the EU's accession criteria by, among other things, abolishing capital punishment, Brussels would move ahead with Ankara's accession. This decision "opened political floodgates in Turkey. Now that the EU took Turkey seriously, the Turkish leadership would treat the EU likewise. The impossible became possible. [In August 2002] Ankara abolished capital punishment."[xxi] Meanwhile, Ocalan continued to run the PKK from his cell.

Ocalan's next move was to put on a peaceful façade for the PKK. "On April 4, 2002, the organization changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and shifted its goal from an 'independent Kurdistan' to a 'democratic Turkey.' This process aimed at writing a new constitution for Turkey, one that would guarantee Kurdish rights and declare Kurds as one of Turkey's two constituent nations together with Turks. In this stage, the organization shied away from using intensive violence, dismissing earlier armed propaganda tactics such as blocking highway traffic and attacking prestigious military bases, villages, and police stations."[xxii]

Of course, none of these steps seemed to change the fact that KADEK was really the PKK. On May 1, 2003, the State Department added KADEK to its Foreign Terrorist Organizations List. In response, the

organization changed its name again, becoming the Kurdistan Society Congress (Kongra-Gel). “In June 2004 the organization renounced its earlier ceasefire and resorted to violence as a bargaining tool (with an emphasis on the timing of attacks replacing its earlier pattern of aiming at prestigious targets) while at the same time demanding political opportunities.” [xxiii]

A New Strategy: Violence and Political Action

Next, “Ocalan started the process of establishing a political party to be called the Democratic Society Movement. On October 23 former Turkish parliament members from the Kurdish nationalist Peoples Democracy Party (HADEP), Leyla Zana, Orhan Dogan, and Hatip Dicle, declared the formation of the Democratic Society Movement. Communications between Ocalan and them, tracked by Turkish intelligence officers, as well as Ocalan’s press remarks on April 18, July 31, and October 23, reported in the Kurdish nationalist daily *Özgür Politika*, prove Ocalan’s role in this movement. It is also relevant that there is significant overlap between the demands of Kongra-Gel and the Democratic Society Movement, including joint emphasis on ‘constitutional recognition to all ethnic identities including Kurdish identity.’”[xxiv] Meanwhile, “several clear links have emerged between the Democratic Society Movement [now a political party, calling itself the Democratic Society Party—DTP] and the PKK, including Ocalan’s role in shaping the DTP’s policies.”[xxv] The growing “prominence of the Democratic Society Movement indicates that while previously Kurdish nationalist political parties, such as HADEP and DEHAP, were secondary to the PKK, now the political party is the main body of the organization, with the military wing working for its sake.”[xxvi]

As this transformation period unfolded, Ocalan seemed intent on embracing violence as a useful bargaining tool. Whereas it “previously focused either on violent tactics or on political action, the PKK is now pursuing both, with the help of Turkey’s relaxed political environment. [xxvii] The PKK then sought a highly visible public face through the DTP. “This strategy was deliberately launched in anticipation of the EU’s December 17, 2004, decision to invite Ankara to begin accession talks.”[xxviii] So much that on December 8 and 9, a group of Kurdish nationalists close to DTP and DEHAP “placed advertisements in the *International Herald Tribune* and *Le Monde* demanding that Turkey give the Kurds political rights similar to those enjoyed by the Basques in Spain and other federated or autonomous nationalities in Europe.” [xxix]

Then “the PKK launched a public campaign calling for Ocalan’s release, as evidenced by declarations on the Kongra-Gel website (www.kongra-gel.net). These moves were preceded and accompanied by PKK attacks against Turkish security personnel across Turkey and in northern Iraq. For example, in the three months following its ceasefire renunciation in June 2004, the group carried out 109 attacks. More recently, Turkish casualties resulting from PKK attacks have occurred at a rate similar to that faced by U.S. forces in Iraq. In addition, the group carried out a number of bombings in resort cities in metropolitan western Turkey, harming the country’s \$15-billion-per year tourism industry.”[xxx]

Turkish Response

The PKK’s two-pronged strategy seems to be backfiring as Turks react to the violence with increasing anger. In several cases, mobs have attacked PKK members captured by security forces as well as DEHAP/DTP sympathizers. “On August 23, 2005, for example, a mob attempted to lynch PKK members being pursued by security forces in Macka, near Trabzon.”[xxxi] Even more dangerous, on September 5, a busload of DTP members “returning from a failed attempt to visit Ocalan (currently

imprisoned on the island of Imrali) was accosted by a mob in Bozuyuk. The passengers had plastered the bus windows with pictures of Ocalan and made victory signs as they approached the crowd. Meanwhile, grassroots nationalist organizations are springing up throughout Turkey to fight the PKK directly. One such group, the Movement of United Patriotic Forces (Vatansever Kuvvetler Güçbirliği Hareketi), reportedly has ninety branches operating in half of Turkey's eighty-one provinces.”[xxxii]

In addition to destabilizing Turkey and costing lives, the PKK's resurgence is harming U.S.-Turkish relations. Ambiguous U.S. responses to Ankara's request for help to fight the PKK in northern Iraq are poisoning Turkey's relations with Washington. In this regard, “the more the PKK uses Turkey's newly liberal political environment to disseminate propaganda while conducting violence, the harsher the public reaction will be. All signs indicate that this backlash will assume an increasingly anti-Western flavor. Such trends should serve as a warning to Washington: although Turkish anger over the PKK was previously directed at Europe (which grants safe haven to numerous PKK front organizations), this resentment is now aimed at the United States as well.”[xxxiii]

Today, “many Turks blame the United States for recent PKK attacks because the organization is based in northern Iraq. Washington's reluctance to confront the PKK has only exacerbated distrust among Turkey's nationalist policymakers, especially the security elite, traditionally Washington's most committed partners. The PKK could damage U.S.-Turkish relations even further if it expanded its attacks into western Turkey—an area containing all of Turkey's large cities, almost all its tourism infrastructure, and a major share of its economic assets. Indeed, the western part of the country lies at the center of Turkish public attention, and any sensational attacks there would turn the full force of the public's ire against the United States.”[xxxiv]

Lessons for Washington

Ironically today, “Washington can learn a great deal from Syria and Iran regarding how best to deal with the PKK. Both countries understand that they have much to gain by going after the group directly. Abandoning their 1990s policy of ‘war by proxy’ against Turkey via support for the PKK, they are now fighting the group in a bid to win Turkey's heart. For example, on June 21, 2005, Damascus declared that it had sentenced several PKK members to thirty months in prison. Tehran adopted a similar policy, attacking PKK bases in Iran that it had previously tolerated.”[xxxv]

If the United States were to actively confront the PKK, it would disarm the threat the PKK poses to U.S.-Turkish relations. In this regard, Washington can approach the issue from two angles at once. “The first angle involves law enforcement measures such as targeting PKK front organizations and financial assets in the West,”[xxxvi] especially those inside the EU.[xxxvii] “Through such actions, Washington can show the Turkish public it is sincere about helping them fight the PKK. In particular, Washington could use its channels to Europe to counter the group's activities, since many PKK-related organizations enjoy safe haven there.”[xxxviii]

The second angle in the fight against the group “entails confronting the PKK directly in northern Iraq. Many have questioned whether force is the only option in that arena. In the wake of Turkey's EU reforms— . . . Kurds can now attend classes and listen to news programs in their own language, an unthinkable development as recently as a few years ago—some expected that the PKK might hear the voice of reason and renounce violence. Yet, the organization seems incapable of such change. [Ocalan and his cadres] are steeped in a culture of violence.”[xxxix] Just as in the 1980s and 1990s, the

organization has resorted to every imaginable form of violence. “Today, it uses violence in an effort to pull Turkey into a political maelstrom and derail EU accession. In this context, the group’s declared ceasefires mean little—the PKK will not abandon terrorism of its own volition. The best short-term method of fighting the organization in northern Iraq is by targeting its leadership.”[xl]

This strategy would work, since the “PKK is more hierarchical than most terrorist groups, composed of a limited number of leadership cadres (who excel at finding allies, funds, and recruits) overseeing fighters who lack proficiency in such functions. Rather than launching a full-scale war on the PKK, the United States can paralyze it by helping to capture its leaders, such as when Turkey captured Abdullah Ocalan with U.S. assistance in 1999.”[xli]

Ocalan’s Enduring Grip

Even while in jail, Ocalan can kill people, damage Turkey’s liberalization process that has been moving ahead in tandem with the EU process, and even hurt the U.S.-Turkish relationship. Ocalan’s unwavering devotion to violence is the only constant in his long struggle against Turkey since 1978. Although Turkey has changed into a freer and more prosperous country, Ocalan has remained the same: a frustrated Maoist who seeks to “kill people for the sake of people.” With his resilience, Ocalan defies time in his jail cell on the Imrali Island in the Marmara Sea, where he is the only inmate. Some say, let him remain in jail; perhaps he will learn. If only his obstinacy did not cost so many precious lives and perhaps a relationship that is so dear to the United States.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute and Düden Yegenoglu is a research assistant at the Institute’s Turkish Research Program.

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- [xxviii] Ibid.
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- [xxxii] Ibid.
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- [xxxiv] Ibid., p. 15.
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1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 452-0650
FAX (202) 223-5364
E-Mail: info@washingtoninstitute.org