

The U.S. Interest in Addressing Germany's PKK Problem

Dec 28, 2011



Brief Analysis

The presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Europe is fast becoming a prism through which the Turks view their ties with Europe, especially in Germany.

U.S.-Turkish relations are experiencing a period of close cooperation. At the same time, Turkey's ties with its European allies are under pressure. The presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Europe is fast becoming a prism through which the Turks view their ties with Europe, especially in Germany, where the PKK has a significant infrastructure. The United States can encourage action against PKK networks in Germany and subsequently take credit for such action with the Turkish public, thus preventing further deterioration in ties between America's European allies and Turkey at a time of improving U.S.-Turkish relations.

Deterioration of Turkish-German Relations

The PKK issue has eroded rapport between the Turks and Germans. On October 31, 2011, two German attorneys filed a case against Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accusing Turkey of "state terrorism against the Kurdish people" and demanding that Erdogan be arrested on those charges. This action followed Erdogan's earlier assertion that "German foundations have extended financial assistance to the terrorist organization PKK."

Since the early summer, the PKK has killed more than 130 Turks across the country. With anger rising inside Turkey, the country has pointed a finger at Germany. As a result, PKK funding and propaganda networks in Europe are under scrutiny by Turkish public agencies, especially in Germany. On October 2, Erdogan asserted that "German foundations lend money to [Kurdish nationalist] Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)-controlled local governments within Turkey, which relay the money to the PKK."

PKK Organizational and Propaganda Networks in Germany

Although the German media has rejected allegations of lending support to PKK entities, Germany appears unwittingly to be the PKK's economic center. In 2007, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) published a report outlining the ways in which the PKK uses Germany as a base to ensure its financial survival.

According to the BfV, the PKK in Germany is divided into three regions, or serits: North, Central, and South. These serits are subdivided into a total of twenty-seven areas. Moreover, several civic associations related to the PKK have been established in major German cities. These associations belong to the Federation of Kurdish Unions in Germany, aka Yekitiya Komalen Kurd Li Elmanya (YEK-KOM). Additionally, Germany is home to organization Yekitiya Xwendekaren Kurdistan (YXK). These groups are involved especially in organizing concerts and festivals, such as the annual ZILAN Women's Festival established in 2006, and the annual International Kurdish Culture

Festival in Gelsenkirchen, which in 2007 boasted attendance of 40,000.

As outlined in BfV reports, the PKK's media presence is tremendously important for the ideological indoctrination of Kurds in Germany as well as for propaganda directed at non-Kurds. Such indoctrination is achieved through various media outlets, including the pro-PKK newspaper Yeni Ozgur Politika (New Free Politics), the PKK's publishing house, Mesopotamia, in Cologne, the Denmark-based network Roj TV, and Firat News Agency, stationed in the Netherlands.

PKK Funding in Germany

According to the European Union's Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2011, funding from Germany plays a highly important role in supporting PKK activities in Turkey. The report states: "The PKK collects money from its members under the rubric of 'donations and membership fees' in lieu of extortion and illegal taxation. In addition to organized extortion campaigns, there are indications that the PKK is actively involved in money laundering, illicit drugs and human trafficking, as well as illegal immigration inside and outside the EU."

These facts are well known by German authorities. German prosecutors and police have tried to inhibit PKK activities, most notably through crackdowns in recent years against the PKK network in Germany. On October 12, 2011, following Erdogan's latest accusations of German support to the PKK, the German police reacted immediately by arresting Ali Ihsan K, PKK's chief of North Germany, on charges that he was running the organization's extortion and illegal taxation operations inside Germany.

According to the official website of YEK-KOM, the PKK's civic arm, a number of German politicians, officials, and even members of the Protestant-Lutheran Church seem to be unknowingly supporting PKK-related activities. In February 2011, for instance, YEK-KOM organized a congress on the property of a Protestant-Lutheran church in Dortmund. Notable politicians attended, such as Guntram Schneider, minister of Labor, Integration, and Social Purposes for the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia along with -- from the same state -- Dr. Stefan Romberg, a Free Democratic Party politician, and Bernhard von Gruneberg, a Social Democratic Party politician. Several labor union representatives attended as well. In addition, Ludger Vollmer, the former German minister of state at the Department of Foreign Affairs, has taken part in the annual International Kurdish Culture Festival organized by YEK-KOM in Gelsenkirchen.

Many Germans are aware that YEK-KOM is the civic arm of the PKK in their country, a fact attested to by YEK-KOM's official website. Additionally, the Ministry of Domestic Affairs of the German state of Lower Saxony affirms that YEK-KOM is a PKK-related organization. Yet such knowledge has done little to hinder support for the PKK among numerous German public figures.

What Can Be Done?

Washington has an interest in weakening the PKK's influence in Germany because it threatens ties between Turkey and Germany, two valuable U.S. allies. What is more, since the Turks view outside actions against the PKK as a sign of friendship, Berlin and Washington can improve their standing in Turkey by taking credit for such actions. This step would especially benefit the United States at a time when the White House is interested in seeing an improvement in popular Turkish support for the United States parallel to the closer relations between Washington and Ankara.

For their part, German security forces and officials are concerned about the PKK's activities in Germany, and Turkish officials have gained valuable insights on the party and its activities in Germany through close and formidable cooperation with their German counterparts. But on the political level, a lack of will on the German side and a lack of trust on the Turkish side have undermined cooperation. Erdogan's accusations targeting German foundations resulted from resentment against German domestic policy and attitudes toward the PKK, even though

no explicit evidence proves that German foundations in Turkey directly support PKK activities.

Given this background, the following are recommendations for the three major players:

Berlin: Germany has already taken positive steps to win back Turkey's trust, and these efforts could be built upon. The German newspaper Tageszeitung reported that German chancellor Angela Merkel, in response to Erdogan's call for "support" in Turkey's "war against terrorism," declared that Germany "is on Turkey's side in its fight against terrorism."

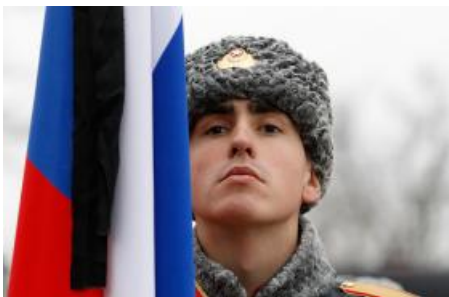
Berlin can also take smart financial action to block pro-PKK media. In this regard, recent U.S.-supported action against the Libyan Jamahiriya Broadcasting Corporation (LJBC) can serve as an example. During the Libyan rebellion against the Qadhafi regime, Washington convinced its European allies to black out LJBC broadcasts in Europe. Ankara would be appreciative if PKK-linked broadcasting were similarly shut down.

Ankara: In the Kurdish opening of 2010, Turkey promised to grant cultural rights to the Kurds. Full implementation of this promise would do much to impress German opinion. An important element of such an effort would be inclusion in the new Turkish constitution now under debate of broader individual rights for the country's citizens, such as expanding freedom of expression, including the Kurds. A liberal charter including broadly defined freedoms would also facilitate Turkey's aspiration to become a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, especially as Turkey seeks to lead during the unfolding Arab Spring.

Washington: The United States should encourage Germany and Turkey to take collaborative action against PKK networks in Germany. A key component of such an endeavor would be close cooperation among U.S., Turkish, and German police and intelligence officials.

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