

PKK Violence Impacts Ankara Policymaking

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Brief Analysis

Washington must prevent renewed PKK attacks from becoming either a wedge between Turkey and Iraq or a bridge between Ankara and Tehran.

On October 22, a group of armed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) members crossed into Turkey from Iraq and killed twenty-four Turkish soldiers, the group's most devastating attack since 1993. In the early 1990s, when the PKK inflicted heavy damage on Turkey, Ankara focused its energies on combating the group, with all domestic and foreign policy debates becoming a subset of the government's PKK policy.

This latest attack -- along with summer incidents in which a total of ninety-two security personnel and twenty-three civilians were killed and another thirty-two taken hostage -- could usher in a new, PKK-dominated era in Turkish politics. Washington must take this "PKK prism" into account, since it may shape not only the country's domestic scene, but also its relations with Iraq and Iran at a time when the United States is looking for Middle East allies to support its policies on Iran and Iraq.

Indeed, the issue will likely dominate Turkish political debate for at least the next few months, including discussions regarding a new constitution. Whereas analysts had expected a new charter to address Kurdish nationalist concerns, the spike in PKK violence renders these hopes obsolete.

The PKK issue will also affect political debate on foreign policy matters, including Ankara's close ties with Iraqi Kurds and Baghdad. Given that the PKK is increasingly using Iraqi territory to attack Turkey, many Turks will oppose further rapprochement of this sort, effectively limiting Ankara's ability to counterbalance Iranian influence inside Iraq.

The PKK is known to have camps inside Iran and has attacked Iranian targets through its local franchise, known as the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). Yet PJAK recently declared a ceasefire with Tehran, suggesting an end to hostilities. If Iran now chooses to ignore the PKK presence on its territory -- as it had done in the past -- it will likely infuriate many Turks. On October 21, however, the Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers declared that the two

countries would "collaborate in fighting the PKK." If this announcement crystallizes into policy, it could cast Tehran as Turkey's friend.

Going forward, Washington should highlight its cooperation against the PKK, particularly the intelligence assistance it provides to Ankara. Simultaneously, it must find ways to prevent the PKK from becoming either a wedge between Turkey and Iraq or a bridge between Ankara and Tehran.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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