

An Opportunity That Comes Once a Millennium

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Articles & Testimony

Newsflash: Turkey has a pivotal opportunity in its battle against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, the kind that only occurs once every thousand years. Since the PKK's establishment in the 1970s, it has focused its operational strategy on Turkey, utilizing foreign countries and state sponsors of terror along the way. However, an integral node of the PKK's success is about to fail, as the outfit is about to lose all of its foreign sanctuaries. If Ankara acts to alleviate the Kurdish problem at home through domestic social and political reforms, then Turkey has a historic opportunity to turn the PKK into a marginal group.

The PKK was established as a Marxist-Leninist group set to attack Turkey during the Cold War. Given its Soviet proscription and ties, the group enjoyed a safe haven in Syria. Moscow utilized the PKK as a tool against Turkey, with the hopes that it would force Turkish decisions and political leanings in Russia's favor. However, even following the end of communism the PKK continued to thrive.

Syria viewed the group as leverage against its neighbor, Turkey. Damascus hoped the PKK could force Ankara to accept its territorial demands regarding the Turkish province of Hatay as well as demands on increased water rights from the Euphrates River. Given this support, the PKK thrived in Syria throughout the 1990s.

Iran, for its part, saw the PKK as a tool with which it could undermine Turkey following its Islamic revolution. Although Turkey and Iran are neighboring Muslim countries, they have diametrically opposed political systems: Iran is a theocratic autocracy, Turkey is a secular democracy. After 1979, Tehran provided support to the PKK to deter its political antidote.

In the 1990s, the PKK also established itself inside Iraq. Following the Gulf War, the United States established a no-go zone for Saddam in northern Iraq. Washington had intended this area to be a safe haven for the Iraqi Kurds; the PKK abused this vision by establishing itself in this political vacuum.

The PKK set up shop in various other countries near Turkey, including money laundering and drug trafficking operations in Bulgaria and Romania, support operations and offices in Russia, Greek Cyprus, and Armenia, and according to U.S. State Department reports, a presence in the Lavrion refugee camp outside of Athens.

By the late 1990s, the PKK had a presence in nearly all of Turkey's neighbors and Turkey's battle against terror looked almost unwinnable.

Today, however, the picture could not be more different. One by one, the PKK's foreign operations have disappeared. On the European side, rapprochement between Turkey and Greece has led Greek authorities to take a firmer stance on the PKK. Turkey's counter-terrorism initiatives have helped diminish the PKK's infrastructure in Bulgaria and Romania, and more recent rapprochement between Turkey and Russia has made Moscow more careful regarding the PKK.

More importantly, the PKK has lost its safe havens. In 1998, Turkey pushed Syria to stop harboring the PKK after decades of delegations, presentations of evidence and arguments. In 1998, Turkish newspapers reported that Turkey was massing troops on its border with Syria $\hat{A}f\hat{A}c\hat{A}^{-}\hat{A}_{\hat{c}}\hat{A}^{1/2}\hat{A}^{-}\hat{A}_{\hat{c}}\hat{A}^{1/2}$ although it is widely stated by insiders that such

troops were never deployed. This implied threat of the use of force, nevertheless, altered Syria's behavior in terms of its support for the PKK. The Syrian Baath regime immediately kicked the PKK leadership out of Syria and started to cooperate with Turkey against the PKK.

Iran, too, stopped harboring the PKK, though for different reasons. At the beginning of the Iraq War, realizing that it was surrounded by a U.S. military presence in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and now Iraq, Iran changed its behavior towards Turkey. Tehran calculated that the benefits of winning its neighbor Turkey's heart outweighed the benefits of hurting secular Turkey through the use of the PKK.

And now, there is good news from Iraq. After the Iraq War, emboldened by a perception that they were the kingmakers in Iraqi politics, the Iraqi Kurds ceased to support Turkey against the PKK. Since 2007 though, feeling the surge of Arab nationalism in Baghdad and Iranian interference in their politics, the Kurds have turned to Turkey as a balancing factor. Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish relations have blossomed; a proof of that is the recent opening of a pipeline from northern Iraq that will export oil through Turkey to Western markets.

Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish rapprochement can be solidified if the Iraqi Kurds act against the PKK inside their own territory. Washington is already helping Turkey against the PKK by providing Ankara with intelligence about PKK presence inside Iraq. Turkey has been bombing and eliminating PKK camps in Iraq thanks to U.S. support. If the Iraqi Kurds denied the PKK a safe haven inside their territory now, this would present Turkey with an opportunity that comes perhaps in a millennium. For the first time ever, the PKK would lose its safe havens within all of Turkey's neighbors, and thus its launch pad for operations in Turkey.

Obviously, Turkey would still have to devise ways to alleviate the Kurdish problem at home and deal with the PKK. There are many positive signs in this regard: the military, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government and Turkey's opinion-makers support new and creative measures, ranging from amnesty to the PKK's rank and file to allowing more cultural freedoms to the Kurds. Turkey stands at a historic juncture and it must seize this opportunity, in order to severely cripple the operational and logistical capabilities of the PKK for good.

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