

Lessons from the Annals of Counterterrorism

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Articles & Testimony

Recent talks between the Turkish government and Massoud Barzani, representing the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, are a positive development in many respects. These talks bridge the gap between two potential pro-Western allies. Moreover, they offer an opportunity for Turkey to deal with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terror threat emanating from northern Iraq. If Turkey and the KRG can devise a common strategy to tackle the PKK, a confidence would be constructed between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, creating a strategic partnership in a greatly necessary sphere. However, if this strategy fails, Turkish-KRG relations may become damaged beyond repair. The annals of counterterrorism teach both sides lessons to avoid failure while successfully tackling the PKK.

A lesson in pitfalls, namely the debilitating effect terrorism can have on continuing negotiations, can be learnt from the past. The Oslo process exemplifies this extremely detrimental effect. Palestinian suicide attacks in 2000 during the apogee of the Oslo talks between the Israelis and Palestinians shattered the Israelis' faith in negotiations. In due course, the bilateral talks collapsed irrevocably. PKK violence now, when the KRG is negotiating with Turkey on the PKK issue, would provide a similar drawback in negotiations. More so, such violence would cast the PKK as a tool of the KRG. It would also portray the PKK and KRG as parties deceptively interested in peace, creating resistance in Turkey against further talks with the KRG on the PKK issue, or any issue for that matter. Last but not least, unabated PKK violence would likely force the Turkish government to take the matter in its own hands, responding to PKK presence in northern Iraq with an iron fist.

There is a great deal that the Iraqi Kurds and Barzani can do to inhibit such developments. Barzani holds influence over the PKK, as demonstrated by his ability to end PKK violence when it rose in June 2007. Amid great concern that Turkey was to enter Northern Iraq, the base of PKK operations, Barzani's actions thwarted this potential escalation. Barzani holds the key today, as well. If he can prevent PKK violence, he will win Turkey's friendship. If not, Turkey would view new PKK violence as Barzani's doing, and Turkish-KRG relations would deteriorate beyond recognition.

The second lesson from the annals of counterterrorism can be drawn from French cooperation with Spain against Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) presence in their country. In the 1980s and the 1990s, Spain and France successfully dealt with ETA presence in France as a segueway to tackling ETA in Spain. The PKK is Turkey's problem and Turkey needs to implement military as well as non-military measures domestically against this organization. However, PKK bases in northern Iraq support the group's attacks on Turkey across the border. Therefore, as it deals with the PKK problem at home, Turkey must neutralize the PKK threat from northern Iraq. Just as Spain defused the ETA in southern France as a precursor to the marginalization of the ETA in Spain, if Turkey can tackle the PKK in northern Iraq, it can hope to marginalize the PKK in Turkey.

Until the 1980s, ETA used bases in southern France to support attacks inside Spain. The French government was oblivious to ETA's presence in its territory and ETA inflicted significant damage on Spain from France. After much Spanish insistence in 1980, Paris started to help Madrid combat ETA, and between 1983-1987, Spanish Antiterrorist Liberation Groups (GAL) became active in southern France against ETA's members. Subsequently, ETA-caused

casualties dropped significantly from 94 in 1980 to 18 in 1987. In 1992, France arrested the entire leadership of ETA in Bidart, France, causing the organization to become a marginal force, and ETA-caused casualties dropped down to 2 in 2006.

Turkey can marginalize the PKK in the same fashion. Taking a note from Franco-Spanish strategy, KRG-Turkish cooperation in denying the PKK refuge in Iraq would open the path for the PKK's marginalization in Turkey. Of course, the PKK would not disappear; rather, the extent of its threat would diminish, as the power of the ETA did following the French crackdown on their presence in its territory. To counter the PKK effectively, Turkey must continue to carry out domestic measures, in order to diminish the strength of the PKK from every angle. One such angle, and a pivotal piece to this strategy, would be the building and strengthening of a relationship between the Turkey and the KRG. Between this strategic partnership and its use of lessons from the annals of counterterrorism, the threat of the PKK can be marginalized. and that would be the best thing to happen in the Middle East in a long time.

Soner Cagaptay, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, would like to thank Merve Demirel for her assistance with this article. ❖

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