

PKK Criminal Networks and Fronts in Europe

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Brief Analysis

On February 13, Frank Urbancic, deputy counterterrorism coordinator at the State Department, told CNN-Turk, "The PKK [Kurdistan Workers Party] is like the mafia all over Europe." He added that in addition to its terrorist presence in Europe, the PKK has an "octopus-like structure carrying out criminal activity, including drug and people smuggling" to raise funds, as well as "fronts that provide cover to the organization's criminal and terror activities."

The United States and Turkey have recently begun to cooperate with each other against the PKK presence in northern Iraq, but the organization's relatively unnoticed European criminal networks and fronts remain a lifeline that, if unchecked, will allow it to remain well funded and supplied indefinitely. For their fight against the PKK to be successful, Turkey, the United States, and the European Union must tackle the group's European activities.

Criminal Fundraising in Europe

The State Department's April 2007 Country Reports on Terrorism stated that the PKK finances its operations through fundraising and criminal activity in Europe. Similarly, a recent NATO Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit (TTIU) report found that the PKK is involved in illegal economic operations such as smuggling, tax evasion, and other forms of organized crime, including drug and counterfeit money trafficking as well as illegal foreign currency exchanges. The report also stated that PKK members apply coercion in collecting funds.

According to figures presented at the NATO Reinforced Economic Committee meeting in November 2007, the illicit narcotics industry is the PKK's most profitable criminal activity. The committee's subsequent report found that the PKK is involved in all phases of the narcotics trade, from raw production in Pakistan and distillation in Iraq to street sales and "taxation" of non-PKK-produced drugs in Europe. The report also showed human trafficking as the PKK's second most profitable illicit activity.

Europol has made a similar case about the PKK's criminal activities, offering specific evidence in its April 2007 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report: "Two PKK members were arrested in France in 2006 for money laundering aimed at financing terrorism. At the end of 2005, three members of the PKK were arrested in Belgium and another one in Germany suspected of financing the PKK. In Belgium, the authorities seized receipt booklets indicating that the arrested suspects were collecting 'tax' from their fellow countrymen. The rise of fundraising activities by the PKK in the EU is related to the escalation of the terrorist campaign of Kurdish terrorists in Turkey."

Fronts and Legal Loopholes

In addition to its criminal network, the PKK also uses fronts and legal loopholes to raise funds in Europe. The TTIU report stated that the group raises a total of \$50 to \$100 million per year. Although the bulk of this amount comes from criminal operations in Europe, approximately \$12 to \$15 million is raised through legitimate or semi-legitimate commercial activities and donations. According to Turkish authorities, the PKK has a vast network of 400 affiliated organizations in Europe -- about half of which are in Germany -- engaged in these commercial activities. The network includes affiliate or sympathizer organizations such as the Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (KON-KURD, headquartered in Brussels) and the International Kurdish Businessmen Union (KAR-SAZ, in Rotterdam).

The PKK also has a vast European propaganda and fundraising network that includes two news agencies, four television stations, thirteen radio stations, ten newspapers, nineteen periodicals, and three publishing houses. These media organizations are scattered across Europe and range from Roj TV in Denmark to the Fırat News Agency in the Netherlands.

Purchasing Weapons

Revenues from the PKK's criminal activities and fronts have long funded the group's weapons purchases in Europe. Between 1984 and 2006, Turkey confiscated a total of 40,045 PKK weapons. The origin of many of the weapons could not be detected due to intentional destruction of identifying marks by producers, smugglers, or the users. Nevertheless, more than 16,000 of them have so far been traced. Some originated in European countries, including Italy, Germany, Belgium, Hungary, and Russia. Moreover, of the 8,015 mines captured by Turkey, 4,857 came from Italy and 2,268 from Russia and the ex-Soviet republics. Such large amounts of weapons, often stored in military depots, normally would not disappear without alerting the authorities.

European Cooperation: Slow but Increasing

The PKK has enjoyed safe conduct in some European countries for quite some time. Today, these nations are beginning to understand the global effects of terrorism and the need for international cooperation, and are accordingly taking steps to ban or restrict PKK activities. For instance, as reported by the Turkish daily Sabah, the British Foreign Office acknowledged in January 2008 that the PKK and its affiliate organizations had been active in Britain and other European countries since 2001. As a result, Britain announced that "foreign terrorist organizations would not be allowed to exploit the territories of the United Kingdom to fundraise any more."

Most European states have also officially recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization (though some, such as Norway, have not yet done so). Accordingly, they are taking some concrete steps against the group. For example, in January 2008, a local Berlin court found a Turkish citizen guilty of leading an underground PKK cell in Bavaria since 1994 and sentenced him to nearly three years in prison.

U.S. Role in Facilitating European Cooperation

According to the European Council's 2002 Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, member states are obligated to take necessary measures to ensure that any involvement with a terrorist group -- whether it be directing, funding, supplying, or participating -- is punishable by law. Unfortunately, European countries have been slow in implementing this legislation.

In order to be successful, the U.S.-Turkish strategy against the PKK presence in northern Iraq should include strong U.S.-Turkish-European counterterrorism tools to shut down the group's European criminal networks and fronts. In this regard, the United States should bring Turkey and Europe together by facilitating joint work among American, Turkish, and European law enforcement agencies.

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