

The PKK Redux: Implications of a Growing Threat

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Nov 15, 2007

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Brief Analysis

On November 5, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and deputy chief of military staff Gen. Ergin Saygun visited President Bush in Washington to discuss the growing threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The composition of the Turkish delegation was symbolically important and demonstrates a new political stability based on the working relationship between the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Turkish military. Yet the newfound weight of the PKK issue may prove problematic for the United States -- and, in the long term, for Turkey as well.

Refocusing on the PKK

In the run-up to this summer's parliamentary elections, Turkey saw an acute polarization between the AKP, the secular parties, and the military. After the AKP won 47 percent of the vote, it seemed as if tensions would continue. A spike in PKK attacks since then, however, has turned the country's attention back to the PKK issue. On October 22, approximately two hundred PKK operatives crossed Turkey's border from northern Iraq and killed twelve Turkish soldiers. This event, following previous attacks that had resulted in dozens of casualties, brought the PKK issue back to the forefront of a nationwide discussion in Turkey. As a result, the previous political barriers between the military and AKP have faded to the background, with secular opposition parties, as well as the media, also coming on board. As long as the PKK attacks continue, Turkey's political elites can be expected to remain in this evolving, working relationship against the terrorist group.

The rise of President Abdullah Gul, Turkey's former foreign minister, will also help defuse domestic tensions. Although the period before Gul's election on August 27 was tense, he now seems to be above party affiliation -- in the Turkish system of parliamentary democracy, the president is a nonpartisan figure. If this trend continues, Gul will further stabilize Turkish politics.

The PKK's Rebirth

Turkey came close to defeating the PKK in the late 1990s, at a time when the group was a formidable challenge: it boasted more than 10,000 members in camps throughout northern Iraq. The PKK crossed the border and attacked Turkey regularly, sometimes in units composed of hundreds of fighters, similar to the large-scale October 22 attack.

Nevertheless, Turkey was able to cripple the group with U.S. intelligence support and regular sweeps of camps in northern Iraq. Between 1988 and 2002, Turkey carried out twenty-four crossborder operations, destroying PKK camps and infrastructure as well as capturing operatives. By the late 1990s, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan had been captured with U.S. assistance, and the depleted PKK finally declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1999.

Today, Turkey's ability to handle the PKK threat is much different. Because it did not participate directly in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Turkey has been unable to keep the organization in check through crossborder operations. For four years, the PKK has been effectively out of Turkey's reach and ignored by the United States, which has focused its efforts on the Iraqi insurgency. Similarly, the Iraqi Kurds who helped Turkey fight the group in the 1990s have not provided that kind of assistance to Ankara since 2003. The PKK has used this strategic breathing room masterfully, regrouping, retraining, and rebuilding to an extent not seen since the early 1990s. It also has new leaders to fill the void left by Ocalan's demise. Finally, the group seems to have purchased Iraqi military equipment that went on the market after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.

A Lull Before the Storm

Snow has begun to fall on the high terrain of northern Iraq, and the PKK may soon declare a unilateral ceasefire as part of its habitual winter hibernation. This would allow it to emerge stronger than ever in the spring. Moreover, the group's ability to successfully attack Turkey since 2003 has given it a newfound attractiveness among its rural recruiting base in Turkey, as well as in Syria. According to Turkish military sources, the PKK's membership has increased from 3,000 to more than 7,000 since 2003. By the time the group reemerges after a presumed winter dormancy, its membership could equal its 1990s peak.

Turkey is currently witnessing significant polarization between the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP), which sympathizes with the PKK and refuses to brand it as a terrorist group, and other political parties. The latter are calling for legal action against the DTP by the constitutional court or the parliament. Such a development could cause a spike in violence even before spring, with the PKK using it to suggest that "politics never works."

At the same time, President Bush's recent pledge of intelligence support against the PKK is a promising development. According to an overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens and policymakers, the PKK issue is the biggest problem in U.S.-Turkish relations today. The group's presence in U.S.-controlled Iraq continues to drive the record levels of Turkish anti-Americanism. According to a 2007 Pew Center poll, only 9 percent of Turks have a favorable opinion of the United States, down from 52 percent in 2000.

In light of such sentiment -- and given that the PKK's forthcoming hibernation will not be the end of the problem, but rather a lull before the storm -- Washington should use the opportunity to take whatever further action it can against the group. Whatever preventive effects the current U.S. intelligence cooperation may have, it is not a curative measure.

Conclusion

The PKK issue may be the biggest and most immediate challenge facing Turkish politics today -- perhaps as severe as it was in the early 1990s. Although this development promises some measure of short-term political stability, it is bad news for Turkey's long-term stability and U.S. foreign policy. Despite two decades of violence, most Turks have long distinguished between Turkish Kurds and the PKK. Renewed violence, however, could change all that. PKK attacks are polarizing Turkish society along a dangerous fault line of Turks versus Kurds. The group's activities, combined with political reforms that granted Kurds cultural rights as well as the presence of Kurdish nationalist parties in parliament, may drive Turks to the conclusion that peaceful Kurdish politics is only a cover for the PKK. In fact, there have already been signs of such a development -- since the October PKK attacks, a number of reprisal attacks have been launched against DTP buildings.

The PKK issue is also important because of its negative repercussions for U.S. foreign policy. The spike in violence is pushing Turks closer to Iran, given Tehran's clever diplomatic decision to combat PKK operatives based in Iranian territory and bomb the group's camps in northern Iraq. This is bad news for the United States given the precipitous drop in its favorability rating in Turkey. Turkish attitudes are consolidating against the PKK and the United States together, as demonstrated by some Turkish demonstrators carrying placards saying "USA = PKK" following a recent PKK attack. Indeed, the group will remain a key player in relations between Turkey, Iran, and the United States, and Washington will be hard pressed to find friends in Turkey if more violence occurs in the months to come.

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