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The PKK, PJAK, and Iran: Implications for U.S.-Turkish Relations

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Brief Analysis

On June 8, a day after reports that Turkish troops had crossed into northern Iraq to pursue members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Iranian aircraft bombed the camps of the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), also in northern Iraq. PJAK, which operates in the mountains of northern Iraq and adjacent areas of Iran, has around 3,000 members. Analysts describe the group as the Iranian branch of the PKK, which has been carrying out attacks on Turkish military and civilian targets for decades and is on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations.

PJAK insists that it is distinct from the PKK, but interviews with its leaders and members, along with a look at its history, suggest that the two groups have similar ideologies and methodologies. They also share leadership and membership, in addition to operating in overlapping areas. Given that both Turkey and Iran view PJAK as a threat, the group poses unique challenges to U.S.-Turkish relations.

Origins of PJAK

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the United States, the PKK officially changed its name to the Kurdistan Democracy Congress (KADEK) in order to escape its terrorist designation. It also created smaller affiliate groups in the hope that they would not be targeted by Turkey or the United States. Then, sometime in the year before the Iraq war began, the PKK split its members among Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran with the intention of spreading its forces. Those who dispersed to Iran formed the Iranian affiliate of the PKK, now known as PJAK.

It is hardly surprising that the PKK and PJAK have remained tightly connected. Previous to his role as head of PJAK, Abdul Rahman Haci Ahmedi is known to have worked with the PKK. Similarly, Ihsan Varya, head of PJAK's coordination committee, was previously in charge of a regional unit of the PKK; founding member Akif Zagros, who was head of PJAK until his death in May 2006, was an important PKK member; and Gulistan Dogan, leader of the

women's branch of PJAK -- the Eastern Kurdistan Women's Union (YJRK) -- was once a PKK member. In addition, PJAK's general assembly, composed of party leaders, was originally formed by PKK leaders.

Current PJAK leader Ahmedi does not downplay the PKK's importance to his organization. When asked about PJAK-PKK ties in a June 2006 interview with the Greek newspaper Eleftherotypia, he replied, "We are brother parties . . . sharing the same core. We support each other." Cemil Bayik, a founding member of the PKK and one of its current leaders, spoke along the same lines in November 2006: "The PKK is the one who formed PJAK, who established PJAK and supports PJAK."

The two groups remain geographically close as well. PJAK's base camp is located on the southern slopes of Mount Qandil, Iraq, currently within PKK-held territory. The PKK's base camp is on the western side of the mountain. Journalists visiting Qandil have reported that entry to PJAK's home base is granted only after passing through several PKK-run checkpoints en route.

Ocalan's Role

There is also wide ideological overlap between the two groups. For example, PJAK promotes the goal of "democratic confederalism" -- that is, dividing Turkey into a confederation of Turks and Kurds. This is the exact goal the PKK has been promoting since 1999, after years of following the revolutionary Marxist/Maoist creed of separatist independence put forth by the organization's founder, Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK switched to democratic confederalism only after Turkey captured Ocalan, in a bid to help his legal defense.

Ocalan is central to the PKK and PJAK alike. During the aforementioned June 2006 interview, when asked whether Ocalan influenced PJAK's struggle, Ahmedi replied, "I would say that he defines our struggle." Indeed, the charismatic former PKK leader has had an unquestionably immense impact. In March 2007, PJAK commander Zenar Agri explained to an American journalist that "the Kurds didn't know about their history and how to struggle [before the PKK]." Now, however, he felt that the Kurds could "follow Ocalan's road to liberation." Other journalists have reported seeing numerous pictures of Ocalan adorning the walls of PJAK enclaves. In another March article, the international IPS news agency referred to PJAK as "a nationalist cult built around the personality of Abdullah Ocalan." Members of the group are required to study Ocalan's works, and many still refer to him with the utmost reverence.

Turkey: Between Iran and the United States

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, clashes between PJAK and Iranian forces have increased in frequency. In 2006, there were reportedly fifteen such incidents, resulting in a total of around fifty Iranians and twenty PJAK members killed. The highest number of incidents took place between April and August 2006, when Iranian forces not only entered Iraq in pursuit of PJAK members, but also bombed an area where both PJAK and PKK members were hiding.

In the 1990s, the fact that Tehran provided safe haven to the PKK created problems for Turkey -- a country whose secular democracy stands in diametric opposition to Iran's regime. More recently, however, Tehran's policy seems to have changed. Since 2003, Iran has been fighting PJAK in an increasingly effective bid to win Turkey's support. These efforts help explain PJAK's bellicosity toward Tehran. At the same time, Iran's involvement in the PKK/PJAK problem has proven to be a successful public diplomacy tool, winning over Turkish public opinion. Unlike during the 1990s, when most Turks took issue with Tehran due to its support for the PKK and other issues (e.g., the assassination of secular Turkish intellectuals by Islamist terrorist cells), the Turkish media now portrays Iran as a friendly country that is helping Ankara against the PKK.

These developments stand in stark contrast to the lack of U.S. action in northern Iraq against the PKK, considered responsible for the deaths of eighty Turks since the beginning of 2007. In February 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Ankara to deliver an impassioned speech about the joint U.S.-Turkish fight against

terrorism, promising help against the PKK. The same day, however, Iran bombed PKK camps inside Iraq and effectively stole Rice's thunder -- a point that Turkish newspapers were quick to note. One paper asserted that while "Americans talk the talk, Iranians walk the walk regarding the PKK," reflecting the public attitude on the issue.

In light of these factors, it should come as no surprise that a 2006 Transatlantic Trends poll showed 43 percent of Turks expressing favorable opinions of Iran, while only 20 percent expressed similar feelings toward the United States. Indeed, Iran's fight against PJAK can be seen as a major challenge for the U.S. policy of preserving Turkey's Western orientation -- as well as Turkey's distance from Iran.

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