

# A Deadly Stumbling Block Named PKK

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Articles & Testimony

The following is The Washington Institute's English-language translation of an op-ed that was published in German.

**[Read this op-ed in the original German. \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1033\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1033)**

On February 6, Belgian police arrested Riza Altun, chief of European operations of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). A day earlier, the French security forces carried out a major sweep against the PKK's financial network in Paris. Since 2004, the PKK has killed or injured more than 1,500 people in Turkey. The PKK is able to conduct these attacks thanks to an extensive financial and propaganda network in Europe. At a time when Turkey's European Union (EU) accession faces serious challenges, the PKK presents a serious strategic problem for Europe: the sanctuary the PKK enjoys on the continent is leading to a massive nationalist backlash in Turkey against Europe.

Recent European action against the PKK is helpful, since European inactivity on the PKK (and American unwillingness to root out the group's Qandil terror enclave in northern Iraq) has been pulling the Turks away from the West. A recent Pew Center poll shows that while around 90 percent of Turks supported EU accession four years ago, today less than half do so. Even more alarming, only 15 percent of Turks have a favorable opinion of Christians and only 12 percent of the Turks like the United States.

Incidentally, while the PKK issue is poisoning Turkish-EU ties, it is bringing Turkey closer to the Muslim Middle East, including countries such as Iran and Syria. Despite the support Iran and Syria give to numerous terrorist organizations, Europe (and the United States) can learn something from both on the importance of effectively dealing with the PKK.

Iran and Syria understand that today they have much to gain by going after the group directly. Accordingly, both have abandoned their 1990s policy of "war by proxy." At the time, Syria hosted PKK leader Ocalan and Iran provided the group with training camps. Instead, today Syria is arresting PKK members, and Iran is actually fighting the PKK in an increasingly successful bid to win Turkey's heart.

Weaker ties with Turkey would be a great shame for Europe at a time when Turkey's credentials as a Western-oriented country provide the continent with the hope of debunking the argument of a clash of civilizations.

Moreover, given that terror is the biggest national security threat to Europe, it would be an even bigger tragedy if Europe lost Turkey because of the PKK -- and, moreover, lost it to Tehran and Damascus.

If the PKK networks in Europe are not dealt with, the PKK will constitute a grave security threat in Europe. The organization's network, built to smuggle its members from Turkey into Europe in the 1990s, has morphed into a criminal "PKK expressway," providing easy access from Northern Iraq to Paris, Berlin, and London. The PKK uses this expressway not only to promote violence but also to raise funds through criminal activity, such as trafficking drugs. For example, British security officials estimate that the PKK smuggles 40 percent of the heroin going from the east into the EU annually.

European intelligence analysts add that the PKK's fundraising activities on its criminal expressway also include the

trafficking of illegal immigrants, another major source of concern for Europe.

Growing fear about these threats prompted European states to move against the PKK. In April 2004, the EU designated as a terrorist group the Kurdistan Society Congress (Kongra-Gel), the new name the PKK had adopted in May 2003.

This designation is important first step, as it gives European governments more room to aggressively move against the PKK's European network. This includes its media channels Roj TV and Mezopotamya TV, two Danish-based television stations. These PKK networks broadcast pro-PKK news and propaganda, including interviews with PKK terrorist leaders and calls for violent action against Turkey.

Europe has already shown leadership in moving against terrorist-controlled media. In recent years, the EU determined that the Hizballah-operated television station al-Manar violated its Television Without Frontiers directive, which prohibits broadcasts that contain any incitement to hatred on the grounds of race, sex, religion or nationality.

Ironically, while Brussels has designated the PKK as a terrorist organization (in contrast to Hizballah which is not on the EU list), the EU continues to permit the broadcasting of both PKK TV channels on the Hot Bird 3 satellite owned by the French company Eutelsat. This is the same satellite company which correctly terminated its broadcasting of Hizballah TV.

The feeling that Europe does not care about incitement to violence against Turks could spell the end of Europhilia in Turkey. Europe is slowly grasping the need to act against the PKK.

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