



Policy Analysis /
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Europe's Terror Problem: PKK Fronts Inside the EU

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Brief Analysis

Since summer 2005, Turkish casualties resulting from attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) have been mounting at a rate close to that experienced by U.S. forces in Iraq. Between July 1 and July 16, for example, when U.S. troops suffered nineteen deaths in Iraq, eleven Turks were killed by the PKK. The bloodshed is creating a nationalist backlash in Turkey, and because most Turks blame Washington for renewed PKK violence emanating from northern Iraq, it is also harming U.S.-Turkish relations. Given U.S. preoccupation with the Iraqi insurgency, a full-scale U.S. campaign against the PKK in northern Iraq seems unlikely in the short term.

But northern Iraq is not the only front on which the PKK is active; it also maintains a working infrastructure in Europe. The continuing PKK presence on the Continent angers Turkey. On November 16, Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan walked out of a joint press conference with Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen because Danish authorities would not remove representatives of the PKK's Roj TV propaganda arm from the meeting hall.

The PKK's Image in Europe: From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists

The PKK wreaked havoc in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s, committing a wide range of violent atrocities, including attacks against Kurdish civilians. In June 1987, the PKK slaughtered the entire population of Pinarçik, a Kurdish village unsympathetic to its cause, in order to coerce nearby villages into submission. For a long time, most European governments adopted a sympathetic position toward the group, whose members they regarded as "freedom fighters." A desire to avoid the organization's wrath also played a role in shaping European attitudes towards the PKK.

For many years, European governments and the EU avoided confronting the PKK. In 1998, after Turkey convinced Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan -- he had enjoyed safe haven in Damascus since the 1980s -- Greece and Italy provided Ocalan with refuge. At the time, Ocalan traveled on a Greek-Cypriot passport. Though Ocalan was the

subject of an Interpol Red Notice, based on an arrest warrant in Germany, the Italian government refused to honor the notice. The EU designated the PKK as a terror group only in May 2002, a month after the group no longer formally existed, having changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK). Accordingly, in the 1990s, thanks to European pusillanimity, the PKK developed a sophisticated infrastructure for fundraising, propaganda, and recruitment in Europe.

Only since they were forced to face a terrorism problem at home have European states taken genuine steps against the PKK. Turkey's improved prospects for EU accession and the fact that the PKK is intent on using violence to sabotage that process have also helped convince some European countries that should they not delay action against the PKK. In April 2004, the EU designated as a terrorist group the Kurdistan Society Congress (Kongra-Gel), the new name KADEK (the earlier PKK) had adopted in May 2003. In November 2004, Dutch security forces shut down a PKK training camp in Liempde, Netherlands, arresting twenty-nine people who were, according to Dutch authorities, "training to prepare for the armed struggle of the PKK in Turkey by committing terrorist attacks."

On September 5, 2005, the German Interior Ministry shut down E. Xani Presse und Verlags, publisher of the pro-PKK Ozgur Politika newspaper. On September 19, the German authorities shut down Welat Press Verlag, operator of the Mezopotamia-Nachrichtenagentur news agency (MHA) and of the web sites of Roj Online. However, on October 20, Germany's Federal Administrative Court overturned the Interior Ministry's decision to shutter Ozgur Politika.

PKK Fronts and Sympathizing Organizations in Europe

Despite these steps, a number of organizations in Europe bear close examination to see if they are in effect PKK fronts or otherwise close to the PKK.

Kurdishinfo.com: This [website](#), hosted in Brussels, belongs to the MHA news service, which has its headquarters at Carl Ulrich Str. 13, 63263, Neu Isenburg, Germany. Counterterrorism experts consider this agency to be one of the most effective pro-PKK organizations in Europe.

Kurdistan Youth Freedom Movement (TECAK): This group's [website](#) is hosted in Denmark. TECAK is extremely violent. According to information posted on its website, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a TECAK spinoff, has carried out a number of attacks in Turkey, including four bombings in Istanbul between October 6 and October 15. On July 16, TAK bombed a bus in the Turkish resort city of Kusadasi. The attack killed five people, including one Briton and one Irish citizen.

Kongra-Gel: A [website](#) belonging to this PKK alias and a [mirror site](#) are hosted in Dusseldorf, Germany.

Kurdistan Italia: The [website](#) for the Rome-based PKK information bureau is hosted in Arezzo, Italy. The website solicits donations to be sent to UIKI-Onlus, with contact information listed as an address at Via Gregorio VII 278, int.18, 00165, Rome, Italy; a telephone number of +39 0663 6892; a fax number of +39 0639 380273; and an e-mail address of uili.onlus@fastwebnet.it.

Roj TV: The Danish-based television broadcaster is headquartered at H. C. Andersens Boulevard 39, DK-1553, Copenhagen. The network, which also operates a [website](#), broadcasts pro-PKK news and propaganda, including interviews with PKK leaders and calls for violent action against Turkey.

Sardasht TV: This Kurdish music broadcaster operates online and links to Roj TV. Its website is hosted in Osthammars, Sweden.

Freedom for Ocalan: Based in Cologne, Germany, the organization refers to itself as the "International Initiative Freedom for Ocalan-Peace in Kurdistan" campaign. It aims to push Turkey to free Ocalan, who is currently in prison in Turkey for his role in unleashing a terror campaign that has caused more than 30,000 deaths. Freedom for Ocalan's [website](#) is hosted in Cologne, Germany. Freedom for Ocalan lists its contact information as addresses at PO

Box 100511, D-50445 and Hohenstaufening 13, D-50674, both in Cologne, Germany; a telephone number of +49 2211 301559; a fax number of +49 2211 393071; and an e-mail address of info@freedom-for-ocalan.com.

Denge-Mezopotamya: This is a Kurdish [website](#) with links to many PKK-affiliated sites, including those mentioned above. The website is hosted in Berlin.

The U.S. Role in Facilitating European Action against the PKK

The PKK machinery remains strong in Europe. Though some EU countries, such as Britain, have banned the PKK and its reincarnations, the organization remains free in a few EU countries, such as Greece. PKK fronts and sympathetic organizations thrive in most EU member states. However, with fresh European willingness to combat terrorism -- the EU agreed on November 29 with its Arab Mediterranean neighbors and Israel on a joint code of conduct to fight terrorism -- further U.S.-European cooperation against PKK front organizations in Europe might be productive.

Money and human capital are the two essential ingredients for any terror group. Severing the PKK's financial and recruiting arms in Europe would help demobilize the threat the group poses to the U.S.-Turkish relationship and to Turkey's EU accession. In this regard, Washington, Brussels, and Ankara may find it useful to coordinate their efforts within the European Counter Terrorism Group, a body composed of all twenty-five EU member states as well as Norway and Switzerland. Such steps would help alleviate Europe's major counterterrorism problem, which one Interpol analyst describes as a "failure to achieve robust multilateral capabilities in the financial and law-enforcement areas due to lack of political will."

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