

Will the PKK Renounce Violence?

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Articles & Testimony

If the US-Turkish relationship is the single most important unintended victim of the Iraq war, then disarming the PKK is a sure way of restoring the partnership to good health. The PKK presence in northern Iraq has thus far escaped US occupation untouched, and the organization has relaunched attacks inside Turkey. Stopping the PKK now will ensure that Iraq-related issues do not damage the US-Turkish relationship further. Indeed, this is the common logic in Washington and Ankara. The question is how to do it.

Neither the U.S. military nor the Iraqi Kurds are willing to act against the PKK, with the former choosing to focus its energies on the insurgency and the latter viewing PKK members as fellow Kurds to be sheltered. Could the PKK come to peace of its own accord? In the wake of recent European Union reforms in Turkey -- Kurds can now study Kurdish and listen to news in their own language -- one would expect that the PKK might hear the voice of reason. Not a chance. Here's why.

The PKK is steeped in a culture of violence and will not commit itself to peace. Since its inception in the late 1970s, the organization has both endorsed and perpetuated this culture, which was already prevalent among the rural, mostly tribal Sunni Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey. A sociologist friend of mine who does research on the PKK's recruiting ability once noted that transitioning into the organization is not such a big deal for most new members hailing from this population, since "they come from a culture of wife beaters." If violence is an accepted method of resolving social problems, then it becomes acceptable to kill civilians to settle a political score. Accordingly, the PKK has used every imaginable form of violence to terrorize Turkey, such as slaughtering the entire population of a village unsympathetic to its cause in order to coerce nearby villages into submission.

Growing up in Turkey, I was struck by a string of "realist" films in the 1970s that depicted the horrible conditions landless peasants endured under brutal landowners, known as agas. It was not until I traveled around Turkey in the 1980s that I realized such dilemmas pertained only to the rural Sunni Kurdish areas of the country. Not surprisingly, the PKK has drawn backing for its violent campaign from the very protagonists of my childhood films. Today, support for the pro-PKK Democratic Peoples Party (DEHAP) is strongest in the aga-run villages of southeastern Turkey, and weaker in the region's towns. Meanwhile, the party's popularity barely crosses the one percent mark in large cities in Europeanized western Turkey, such as Istanbul and Izmir, where around half of the country's Kurds live.

That is why the PKK strives to ensure that modernization does not wipe away the remains of the tribal structures in southeastern Turkey. For example, the organization has worked to sabotage the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP), which aims to erect massive irrigation structures across the region's impoverished and parched landscape. GAP would usher in a new, water-based and cash-loaded economy in southeastern Turkey, weakening the grip of tribal culture over the rural Kurds. Accordingly, the PKK actively worked against the project during the 1980s and 1990s, with a helping hand from Syria, which had its own reasons to impede GAP.

The PKK has not changed much since then. It still fights modernization. The group's new target is Turkey's EU entry process. To this end, the PKK has increased its attacks. The organization wants to derail Turkey's EU accession by

pulling the country into a maelstrom of violence. What is more, once again reminiscent of the past, the organization's death squads have assassinated a number of non-PKK Kurdish activists in Turkey and northern Iraq in recent months. Indeed, the group's recently declared 30-day ceasefire means very little -- the PKK will not abandon terrorism of its own volition. Only with resolute action will Turkey defeat PKK terror. In this regard, both the new Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds have a responsibility to act against the PKK -- the former to demonstrate its sovereignty against a foreign terror group on its soil, the latter to prove their sincerity in the global war on terror.

Ankara will need help from Europe and the United States as well. The Europeans are already under the spotlight; many of the PKK's front organizations -- including its media arms, such as Roj TV in Denmark -- enjoy safe haven inside Europe. Meanwhile, with the PKK headquartered in northern Iraq, further terrorist attacks inside Turkey will inevitably lead many Turks to blame Washington for the organization's campaign of violence, exacerbating the strains in U.S.-Turkish ties. Recent bilateral meetings are an optimistic sign that Washington and Ankara are aware of the gravity of this issue.

The PKK poses the greatest threat to the U.S.-Turkish relationship. Hoping that the group will magically renounce violence is naive. Countering such violence with a resolute stance is the way to defeat it.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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