

# Hizballah in Turkey Revives: Al-Qaeda's Bridge between Europe and Iraq?

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## Brief Analysis

On January 12, Turkish police arrested Mehmet Semih Arikan, a member of Hizballah in Turkey, a group not necessarily part and parcel with Lebanese Hizballah, while he was carrying out a reconnaissance mission near the governor's office of Konya province, ten minutes ahead of a scheduled visit by Gen. Fevzi Turkeri, commander of the Turkish gendarmerie. Hizballah is alive in Turkey, despite a 2000 crackdown in which security forces arrested 3,366 of its members and killed its leader and founder Huseyin Velioglu. What is more, according to recent intelligence this group might have established links with al-Qaeda. Why has the organization been able to recover from the 2000 crackdown? Given its suspected al-Qaeda connection, what kind of threat does it pose to Turkey and the West?

### Background: A Kurdish Hizballah in Turkey

Hizballah emerged in Turkey's predominantly Sunni Kurdish southeast in the 1980s. Unlike Alevi Kurds and Turks, whose faith encompasses a liberal version of Islam, and Sunni Turks, who belong to the relaxed Hanefi school, Sunni Kurds adhere to the strict Shafi'i school and are among Turkey's most conservative constituencies. Thus, after its emergence, Hizballah found a receptive audience in southeastern Turkey, becoming a Kurdish group.

Organizational structure and Iranian support. Like other Kurdish terror groups in Turkey, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Kurdish Hizballah (KH) under its leader Velioglu developed a strictly hierarchical structure. Iran played a crucial role at this stage: Velioglu was inspired by the Iranian revolution, received funding from Tehran, and members of the organization went to Iran in the 1980s for training.

Clash with the PKK. From the beginning, KH faced a challenge from the PKK, a Marxist-Leninist organization that dominated southeastern Turkey in the early 1990s. The two groups' opposing worldviews inevitably led to a bloody fight. After the PKK attempted to force KH to join its ranks in the early 1990s, the latter took up arms. KH's initial

success against the PKK in places such as Batman, Gercus, Mardin, Van, and Silvan increased its popularity among Kurds. At this stage, the organization shied away from targeting government institutions or security forces, while the Turkish security forces had their hands full with the PKK and saw fighting that group and not the KH as their priority.

While the PKK, under the influence of its Marxist ideology, targeted the Kurdish tribal structure, KH received support from the religiously conservative tribes. Nevertheless, the group's newfound human resources were depleted in its long fight against the PKK between 1991 and 1995. Even if KH managed to kill over 500 members of the gargantuan PKK—a relatively small loss for the latter, which had over 15,000 foot soldiers—it lost over 200 of its own members. Once the Turkish security forces defeated the PKK in the late 1990s, arresting its leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999, and turned their attention to the KH, the group was easy prey.

### Decline

Turkish police dealt a serious blow to KH in a massive roundup that began in the Mardin province on March 14, 1999, with the capture of the organization's computer files including personnel records. In the final operations of the roundup in Istanbul in January 2000, the police killed Velioglu and arrested KH's military-wing leader Cemal Aydin and Istanbul representative Edip Gumus. (Mutilated and tortured corpses of seventy people found in KH hideouts caused a massive public uproar against the group at that time. Yet, while identifying KH as a terror target, in a nuanced approach Turkish security forces have shied away from calling it an "Islamic terror group," a term they believe agitates most Muslims and would only help KH recruit more militants.)

KH's decline followed soon after, with the police arresting 3,366 of its members in 2002, 1,596 more in 2001, and another 710 in 2002. Moreover, on September 5, 2001, security forces killed Velioglu's successor, Sulhattin Uruk, and Uruk's successor Mehmet Besir Varol was arrested in operations on May 17, 2003.

### Revival

Despite these operations, KH seems to be regrouping in Turkey and in Europe. How can this be explained?

- The organization's sympathizer cadre—a shocking 20,000 people, according to the computer files seized by the police—remains active.
- Under the new leadership of Isa Altsoy, the organization has moved away from violence to establishing grassroots support. KH, which has not published before, is now using the media for public outreach. In 2004 the organization printed six books (8,000 copies of each), including one explaining its history. In addition, it has issued three magazines: *Gonulden Gonule Damlalar*, *Inzar* (published in Fatih, Istanbul, and with an increasing circulation of 7,000), and *Mujde* (published in Basel, Switzerland). Moreover, the organization has opened two bookstores (*Davet Kitapevi* in Elazig and *Risale Kitapevi* in Batman in eastern Turkey) and a nongovernmental organization, *Insan Haklari ve Mustazaflarla Dayanisma Dernegi* (Association for Human Rights and Solidarity with the Oppressed) in Diyarbakir.
- Some military-wing and high-ranking members of the group who avoided arrest have fled to Europe. Others have gone to Syria, and also northern Iraq, where according to intelligence sources there may be as many as 100 unorganized KH members.
- Approximately 950 KH militants were released from prison after July 29, 2003, when Turkey passed an amnesty law for the benefit of PKK members (of whom only 720 took advantage of this law). Most freed KH militants have returned to the organization either in Turkey or in Europe.

### European Base and Financing

Since 2002, the organization has increased its activities among Kurds in Europe, particularly in Germany, Holland,

Switzerland, and Austria, establishing associations, mosques, sports clubs, and small businesses, such as mosques in Cologne and Hamburg. As part of its outreach program, KH has set up discussion groups and organized propaganda teams to visit weddings and funerals in Europe. KH's growing European network raises funds by using Muslim charitable giving, such as fitre (alms) and zakat (tithe). Other means of financial gain include collections in KH-controlled mosques, KH-owned small businesses, and ransom paid for businessmen kidnapped by KH. Most importantly, according to one intelligence source, in 2004 KH started getting money from al-Qaeda affiliate groups through London.

Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Bridge between Europe and Northern Iraq?

That KH is laying roots in Europe and that it receives funds from al-Qaeda may be related. According to one intelligence analyst, in Syria the organization helps al-Qaeda militants from around the world cross into Iraq. Consequently, with its Kurdish base in Europe, acting out of solidarity and also receiving cash, KH offers al-Qaeda, whose own networks are under scrutiny, an alternative, so far unscrutinized, bridge for travel from Europe via Turkey into Syria and from there into Iraq.

Fighting Kurdish Hizballah

KH's revival in Turkey, its organization in Europe, and likely links with al-Qaeda make it more dangerous than ever. The following steps might lessen the threats KH poses for Turkey, Europe, and the United States:

Better cooperation between European, American, and Turkish intelligence bodies. This would help them develop a bigger picture of KH's capabilities as opposed to the limited view individual agencies might currently possess.

Putting KH on terror lists in Europe and the United States. This would be especially effective if European governments and the European Union were to shut down the group's growing financial and social networks in Europe.

Committed fight by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey against KH. This would help especially since KH-led terror acts would hurt the credibility of the AKP, which is moving toward shedding the legacy of its Islamist pedigree.

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