

# Is the PKK Still a Threat to the United States and Turkey?

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## Brief Analysis

On December 31, 2004, terrorists belonging to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group on the U.S. State Department's Foreign Terror Organizations (FTO) list, ambushed Turkish security officers in the Sirnak province in southeastern Turkey, near the Iraqi border. Although the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire after Turkey captured its leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999, in June 2004 the organization renounced its ceasefire. The PKK, which caused over 35,000 casualties between 1984 and 1999, has once again come to the foreground. Today, the organization has an estimated 1,850-1,950 terrorists in Turkey and another 5,500-5,800 in areas of northern Iraq controlled by two Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Since the U.S. military and the Iraqi government exercise nominal rule over these parts of Iraq, continued PKK activity in northern Iraq constitutes a threat to Turkish-Iraqi/Kurdish as well as Turkish-U.S. relations, and therefore bears the potential of undermining U.S. interests. The question is: will the PKK, which has been moving between violent and peaceful facades, be able to maintain its campaign against Turkey? And if so, what should be done against this organization in the global war on terror?

## Understanding the PKK's Transformation

Why has the PKK been fluctuating between peaceful and violent facades? The answer lies in understanding a number of developments that have forced the organization to revisit its violent tactics:

- Military defeat and Ocalan's capture: While successful operations by the Turkish military throughout the late 1990s in Turkey and northern Iraq crippled the PKK's operational capabilities and morale, the capture of Ocalan, the head of this hierarchical Stalinist organization, seriously undermined its ability to make decisions.
- Post-September 11 conjuncture: Emerging international consensus against terror in the post-September 11 world gave the PKK a bad name and led the organization in the direction of nonviolent tactics.
- New internal/social environment of Turkey: The fight against the PKK in southeastern Turkey in the 1990s caused

massive migration from mountain villages (the bedrock of support for the PKK) into metropolitan areas in western Turkey, the country's industrialized and developed areas. This migration lessened logistical support for the organization, while jumpstarting the urbanization and assimilation process of most Kurds now in western Turkey. Additionally, the process provided Turkish security forces with better opportunities for more successful operations against PKK in the cities, where they have a much better grip than in the countryside.

In order to face such challenges to its terror capabilities, the PKK started to transform itself into a political movement through the following four stages:

- **Ceasefire declaration:** Ocalan declared a ceasefire on August 1, 1999, and the PKK moved its militants out of Turkey into northern Iraq. The primary aim at this stage was to avoid Ocalan's execution.
- **KADEK:** On April 4, 2002, the organization changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and shifted its goal from an "independent Kurdistan" to a "democratic Turkey." This process aimed at writing a new constitution for Turkey, one that would guarantee Kurdish rights and declare Kurds as one of Turkey's two constituent nations together with Turks. In this stage, the organization shied away from using intensive violence, dismissing earlier armed propaganda tactics such as blocking highway traffic and attacking prestigious military bases, villages, and police stations.
- **Kongra-Gel:** Soon after the State Department added KADEK to its FTO list on May 1, 2003, the organization changed its name to the Kurdistan Society Congress (Kongra-Gel). In June 2004 the organization renounced its earlier ceasefire and resorted to violence as a bargaining tool (with an emphasis on the timing of attacks replacing its earlier pattern of aiming at prestigious targets) while at the same time demanding political opportunities.
- **"Democratic Society Movement":** When the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Peoples Party (DEHAP) lost stronghold cities such as Bingol, Siirt, Van, Mus, and Agri in the March 28, 2004, local elections -- a sign that PKK/Kongra-Gel's appeal is in decline -- Ocalan started the process of establishing a political party. On October 23 former Turkish parliament members from the Kurdish nationalist Peoples Democracy Party (HADEP), Leyla Zana, Orhan Dogan, and Hatip Dicle, declared the formation of the Democratic Society Movement. Communications between Ocalan and them, tracked by Turkish intelligence officers, as well as Ocalan's press remarks on April 18, July 31, and October 23, reported in the Kurdish nationalist daily *Özgür Politika*, prove Ocalan's role in this movement. It is also relevant that there is significant overlap between the demands of Kongra-Gel and the Democratic Society Movement, including joint emphasis on "constitutional recognition to all ethnic identities including Kurdish identity." The growing prominence of the Democratic Society Movement indicates that while previously Kurdish nationalist political parties, such as HADEP and DEHAP, were secondary to the PKK, now the political party is the main body of the organization, with the military wing working for its sake.

Can the PKK Still Hurt Turkey?

Even though the PKK aims to become a political party, the organization's leadership does not want to dismantle its military wing. In this transformation period, violence is meant to be a bargaining tool. Turkish intelligence analysts state that "on the one hand, with terror, the PKK wants to show to the Kurdish community that it is still alive and without its permission no other Kurdish organization can play a significant role in the Kurdish issue; and on the other hand, the organization wants to show to the Turkish state it is the only actor of the Kurdish question in Turkey's democratization process." By resorting to violence, the PKK wants to prove that it can still hurt Turkey, economically, politically, and socially. Accordingly, in 2000 there were 584 PKK-led attacks and incidents; in 2001, 729; in 2002, 757; in 2003, 1,500; and in 2004, 975. Between June 1 and August 30, 2004 -- after the organization renounced its ceasefire -- there were 109 PKK attacks, in which 35 Turkish security officers were killed and 94 were injured. These numbers clearly indicate that the organization has the capability to harm Turkey.

Also, since June 2004 the organization has sent an estimated 1,200 of its militants from northern Iraq into Turkey. The PKK is still able to create disorder in Turkey's southeast, and thus has the ability to create an unsafe environment with which it can manipulate Turkey's European Union (EU) accession negotiations, block the integration of Kurds into Turkish society, and create discord in Turkish-Iraqi/Kurdish and Turkish-U.S. relations.

Why Should the United States Act against the PKK?

An increase in PKK-led violence in Turkey, creating political chaos that would stop the country's EU accession process, would be a serious threat to Turkey's stability. Besides, since the PKK's main bases are in northern Iraq, most Turks would blame the United States and the Iraqi Kurds for any PKK-led violence. (As was the case after the killing of five Turkish diplomatic security officers near Mosul on December 18, 2004, an incident which, though clearly a doing of the Iraqi insurgents, was initially blamed on the United States, the PKK, and the Iraqi Kurds in the Turkish media.) Washington's reluctance in taking action against the PKK has already created much distrust toward the United States among Turkish policymakers, especially the security elite (see [PolicyWatch no. 839 \(templateC05.php?CID=1717\)](#)). Action against the PKK, such as capturing the organization's remaining captains (see [PolicyWatch no. 877 \(templateC05.php?CID=1755\)](#)), would help the United States establish bridges with Turkey's military security elite, with whom relations have been hampered since the Iraq war. Such a step would also allow Washington to establish a more positive image within the Turkish public, among whom anti-Americanism has become a potent force since 2002. Action against the PKK would be a first and necessary step in rebuilding U.S.-Turkish relations in the post-Iraq war environment.

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