

# The PKK's New Offensive: Implications for Turkey, Iraqi Kurds, and the United States

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## Brief Analysis

On June 1, 2004, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- an organization that appears on the State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations and whose attacks caused more than 30,000 deaths in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s -- declared that it had rescinded its unilateral "ceasefire" of February 2000. This declaration was quickly followed by an escalation of violence in southeastern Turkey. This development poses a threat to Turkey's internal security and to the European Union reform process that began after Ankara apprehended PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999. Ocalan's capture led to a drop in PKK violence and a relaxation in the country's political environment, catalyzing reforms on the Kurdish issue that had previously been deemed impossible (see [PolicyWatch no. 786 \(templateC05.php?CID=1664\)](#)).

The implications of heightened PKK violence are also grave for Iraqi Kurds and the United States. The PKK has more than 5,000 terrorists in portions of northern Iraq controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Hence, if PKK violence continues to increase in Turkey, much of the blame will likely be aimed at Iraqi Kurds and the United States. These two parties, in cooperation with Turkey, must act now to develop an effective means of disarming and shutting down the PKK.

## Ceasefire or Not?

The PKK, which began its attacks in Turkey in 1984, heightened its activities in the aftermath of 1991 Gulf War, using the political vacuum in northern Iraq as a platform from which to launch massive attacks into Turkey. By 1999, 75 percent of the organization's terrorists were based in northern Iraq.

Despite its ceasefire declaration after Ocalan's capture, the PKK never truly abandoned violence. Instead, it regrouped in northern Iraq and continued its activities in Turkey. In 2001, for example, the Turkish military reported nearly 200 "contacts" with PKK elements (i.e., incidents such as ambushes on Turkish security forces and bombings) resulting in more than 100 militants killed in action. These incidents included explosions caused by landmines that the PKK continued to place throughout Turkey. In 2001 alone, there were almost ninety such explosions, killing five security personnel and civilians and maiming eighty-eight others.

In summer 2003, the PKK made a strategic decision to infiltrate back into Turkey. Since then, an estimated 1,500

PKK terrorists have joined their 500 comrades already in Turkey, with some 300 of these operatives crossing the border between April and June 2004. These terrorists are well armed with weapons from the old Iraqi army (e.g., surface-to-air missiles), obtained in northern Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the war in April 2003. On the Iraqi side of the border, the PKK maintains around 5,300 terrorists at nine bases near Haftanin, Hakurk, and the Iranian and Iraqi sides of Mount Qandil. The organization continues to traverse Iranian territory to infiltrate into Turkey. In late spring 2004, the Turkish army deployed an air-mobile infantry brigade along the Iranian border in a massive cordon-and-search operation aimed at unearthing PKK terrorists operating from that country.

Since the PKK's June 1 declaration, Turkish forces have reported as many as forty-one contacts with the group in southeastern Turkey. A total of fourteen Turkish security personnel and twenty-five PKK members were killed in these incidents. Ten of these contacts occurred in the historically restive province of Tunceli. Also targeted were the Syrian border provinces of Hatay and Mardin (four contacts) and the Iraqi border provinces of Hakkari (which also borders Iran) and Sirnak (seven contacts). Even hinterland provinces such as Adiyaman, Bingol, Elazig, Batman, Diyarbakir, and Mus -- located hundreds of kilometers from the Iraqi border -- were targeted (twenty contacts), highlighting the PKK's yearlong effort to infiltrate these areas.

Can the PKK Hurt Turkey?

In the aftermath of the aforementioned political reforms in Turkey, the PKK's popularity among Turkish Kurds has waned. Moreover, the PKK no longer enjoys the same degree of support it once garnered from Syria, nor the same freedom of movement it once had inside Iran. Both Damascus and, to a lesser extent, Tehran yielded to pressure from Ankara and began to deny open support (through not sanctuary) to the PKK. The PKK is also distanced from the PUK in Iraq. In his new role as an Iraqi statesman, PUK leader Jalal Talabani has publicly sided with Turkey against the PKK's latest offensive. Moreover, amid reports that Iraqi Kurdish members of the PKK are leaving the terrorist organization to join the KDP, former KDP official and current Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari promised not to allow the PKK to remain in Iraq. Nevertheless, the PKK is still very much active in northern Iraq. At the same time, the PKK continues to receive support from elements in Europe. The organization will likely raise an estimated \$20 million in Western Europe this year. Much of this funding comes from Germany, despite the country's ten-year-old ban on PKK activity.

In view of its weakened military capabilities, the PKK may opt to launch spectacular attacks in order to boost its popularity among Turkish Kurds. The seizure of 150 pounds of plastic explosives from PKK terrorists over the last six months, mostly in Turkish urban centers, may be an indication that such attacks are in the planning stage.

Implications for the United States

Increased PKK violence could pull Turkey into a political maelstrom and poison relations between Ankara and Iraqi Kurds. Therefore, the United States should work with Turkey, the Iraqi Kurdish factions, and the new Iraqi government to shut down the PKK. Baghdad's role has become particularly important now that the organization is established outside the Turkish-Iraqi border area (e.g., PKK operatives are known to have set up offices in cities such as Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Irbil, and Baghdad under the name "Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party"). Measures to achieve this goal could include the following:

Crippling the organization by capturing its captains. The PKK has a leader-driven, Stalinist structure. Since Ocalan's capture, a leadership council composed of Ocalan lieutenants Osman Ocalan (his brother), Cemil Bayik, Nizamettin Tas, Murat Karayilan, Duran Kalkan, and Mustafa Karasu has headed the organization, though somewhat unsuccessfully. For example, a PKK attempt in 1999-2002 to spark a Palestinian-style uprising in Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey failed. The council split into hardliner and reformist camps in the wake of this failure, and Osman Ocalan, a reformist member, was forced to leave his post by Bayik and Karayilan's hardliner clique. (Karayilan also

appears to be the leading voice in the recent decision to rescind the "ceasefire"). The elimination of this weakened leadership council would be a decisive step in destroying the PKK's nerve center, reducing its operational capabilities and lowering morale among its cadres.

Getting the KDP and the PUK to join the fight. The KDP and the PUK would achieve multiple goals if they participated in the fight against PKK elements based in territory under their control. First, they would send an important message to Washington, signaling that they are willing to fight the war on terror even if it involves combating Kurdish terrorism. Second, they would have an opportunity to gain Turkey as an ally. Iraqi Kurds need all the allies they can get, particularly now that they are surrounded by unfriendly forces such as Iraq's Arab majority (which is anxious about the Kurds' political power), fundamentalist Iran (which is uneasy about their secularism), and Syria (which is apprehensive about Kurdish nationalism).

If the PKK is not shut down, its violent activities will likely pull Turkey into chaos. Given that the organization is now based in northern Iraq, Turks would place much of the blame for such violence on the United States, and U.S.-Turkish relations would suffer a serious blow. Washington and its allies cannot afford either consequence.

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