

Time to Shut Down the PKK: Why the United States and Turkey Should Work Together

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Sep 12, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

A U.S. government team is in Ankara today for talks with members of the Turkish military and intelligence services regarding the future of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization on the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list. On September 2, 2003, the PKK, whose past attacks have cost Turkey 35,000 lives, renounced a unilateral ceasefire it had declared in February 2000. This is a dangerous development for three reasons. First, PKK violence could throw Turkey back into the political maelstrom of the 1990s, and it is in Washington's best interests to help preserve democratic Turkey's stability. Second, if the PKK attacks Turkey from U.S.-controlled northern Iraq, where it has an estimated 4,000-5,000 terrorists, this could put Washington and Ankara at loggerheads. Third, Turkey considers joint action against the PKK a sine qua non for U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Iraq; it is unlikely that Ankara will send troops to Iraq unless the PKK issue is tackled. Given all of these reasons, the threat that the PKK poses to U.S. national interests is now at such a level that the organization is a legitimate target in the war on terror. Therefore, it is time to take action against the PKK.

The PKK and Turkish Reform

New PKK violence would harden the Turkish political atmosphere, which could in turn sway public opinion against the country's ongoing political liberalization. Such liberalization gained momentum after Ankara captured PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan on February 16, 1999. Left without a head, the PKK declared a ceasefire on February 9, 2000. As violence subsided, Turkey relaxed. Significant reforms followed, including enhanced Kurdish education- and new laws comparable to the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. Now, the PKK's call to arms could threaten a reform process that may catapult Turkey toward European Union (EU) membership (see Soner Cagaptay, "European Union Reforms Diminish the Role of the Turkish Military: Ankara Knocking on Brussels' Door," PolicyWatch no. 781, August 12, 2003).

Explaining the PKK's Recent Moves

Although the PKK's recent turn presents several challenges, it also offers clues on how to tackle the organization. After Ocalan was captured and imprisoned, the PKK's morale was crippled. The organization found itself headless and lacking in many operational capabilities. Then, it opted for new tactics. First, it declared a ceasefire in 2000.

Then, on April 16, 2002, it changed its name to the Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK), declaring its commitment to nonviolence. Neither Ankara nor Washington took that declaration seriously; both treated KADEK as the PKK in disguise, with Washington adding KADEK to its FTO list in December 2002.

The PKK's moves after Ocalan's capture also demonstrate that the organization is hierarchical and leadership-driven. Hence, its operational capabilities would be further diminished if Ocalan's captains -- Nizamettin Tas, Murat Karayilan, and Ocalan's brother, Osman Ocalan -- were captured. In this regard, the PKK's renunciation of the ceasefire is telling. On August 8, 2003, Ankara promulgated an amnesty law as part of its ongoing reform process. The law, to remain in effect until February 8, 2004, stipulates favorable terms for those PKK members who agree to end the conflict. Militants who have not taken part in attacks are to receive no punishment if they lay down arms. Those involved in violence are to be given lenient jail terms: nine to twelve years if they have committed murder, with the rest receiving a four-fifths reduction in sentences. Yet, the organization's captains are barred from taking advantage of the amnesty; this is why the PKK leadership has decided to take up arms again.

How to Fight the PKK

The PKK will not be beaten through classic warfare. Rather, a differentiated approach is necessary, one that takes into account the organization's dynamics. Ankara and its allies should consider the following strategies:

Capture the leadership. U.S.-Turkish cooperation against the PKK should focus on capturing the organization's elite cadres in order to destroy its nerve center. This would reduce the PKK's operational capabilities and drive down its morale. It would also facilitate the surrender of militants who would otherwise hesitate to turn themselves out of fear of retribution by the PKK leadership.

Promote amnesty for the organization's foot soldiers. Turkey and the United States should actively appeal to the PKK's membership, offering them protection so that more of them will return to Turkey.

Battle against rump PKK members once Turkey's amnesty law expires. If the United States cannot dedicate sufficient forces to battle those PKK members who remain in northern Iraq beyond the February 2004 deadline, Turkey should consider stepping up to the plate. Moreover, because the PKK is based in areas of northern Iraq controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Washington should consider asking these parties to help remove the PKK from northern Iraq. Currently, both of these parties are playing a role in running Iraq. Taking action against the PKK would be an opportunity for them to prove that they are up to the challenge of governance, including that of securing sovereign Iraqi territory. Lack of KDP-PUK cooperation in the fight against the PKK would turn northern Iraq into another southern Lebanon, a region of nominal government authority where terrorist groups operate freely. This is not in the interests of the United States.

Cut off the PKK's financial lifeline. The EU can play a role in the fight against the PKK as well. So far, the EU has exhibited a complacent attitude toward the organization. For instance, Brussels did not put the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations until May 2002, after the name "PKK" had officially ceased to exist following the creation of KADEK. The EU does not see KADEK as a terrorist organization. Thus, for all practical purposes, the PKK operates freely within the EU, recruiting operatives, maintaining cells, and, more important, collecting funds. In this regard, EU's historic September 6, 2003, decision to outlaw Hamas may serve as a model for action against the PKK. By banning Hamas, which it had previously permitted to function freely on the grounds that it was a political organization, the EU confirmed a landmark decision in the war on terror: there is no distinction between the political and militant "wings" of a terrorist organization. This principle should guide the EU's policy toward the PKK-KADEK as well. Shutting down the PKK would not only boost the EU's credibility as a principled organization, but also help support the reform process in Turkey. The EU needs a politically stable and peaceful Turkey, not a country destabilized by a terrorist organization that enjoys European sanctuary.

The Road Ahead

The PKK needs to be shut down because it threatens Turkey's stability, the future of U.S.-Turkish relations, and even the success of Operation Iraqi Freedom. At this stage, simply reaching agreements with the PKK so that it will refrain from violence is not an option. This fact is confirmed by recent U.S. experiences with the Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) in Iraq, a terrorist group on the FTO list. After Saddam Husayn's regime was toppled, the MEK surrendered to U.S. forces. Yet, the group retained its arms and was not effectively shut down. Today, the MEK is a major headache; many U.S. forces that are sorely needed elsewhere are instead tasked with monitoring the group to ensure that it does not resort to violence. Hence, a multipronged approach (including combat) would perhaps be the most optimum means of shutting down the PKK.

With support from the EU, the KDP, and the PUK, Turkey and the United States could take successful action against the PKK. If these parties do not pursue a decisive, multifaceted campaign to shut down the PKK, internal mayhem would likely erupt in Turkey, with U.S.-Turkish relations suffering yet another blow. In the post-September 11 world, Washington and its allies cannot afford either consequence.

◆ Soner Cagaptay is coordinator of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Policy #786

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-
analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-
analysis/turkey)