

Leadership reshuffle - PKK makes changes in its ranks

The PKK has radically restructured its leadership positions in an attempt to increase its standing in Turkey. *Soner Çagaptay* and *Coskun Unal* examine the impact this reshuffle will potentially have on Turkey and the PKK's potential involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Key Points

- New appointments in the leadership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) suggest preparations for return to a more hard-line stance towards Turkey should the peace process break down.
- They also signal that the PKK is likely to take a more active military role in Syria, potentially in alliance with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces.
- The new leadership is also likely to mend fences with Iran after the group fought Tehran for almost a decade through its Iranian branch, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê: PJAK).

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) convened a 162-delegate congress at its Qandil Mountains base in northern Iraq on 9 July 2013 and made sweeping changes to its leadership. The changes made to the party's leadership in July have key ramifications for Turkey and the wider Middle East, including the Syrian civil war. They signal a potential change of course in the PKK's ties with Iran, a more aggressive position in Syria's conflict, and likely preparations for a potential campaign in the event of the breakdown of the peace process with Turkey that began in late 2012.

The PKK is an armed group whose aim is to achieve self-determination for the Kurdish population in Turkey. The group has led an insurgency in eastern Turkey since the late 1970s, and is illegal under Turkish law. In this sweeping restructuring of the PKK's leadership, Murat Karayilan (alias Cemal), one of the party co-founders, was assigned as the new commander-in-chief of the PKK's armed wing, the People's Defence Force (Hêzên Parastina Gel: HPG). Karayilan is an experienced fighter and an expert in unconventional warfare; he headed the PKK's General Assembly's Executive Council, namely the Kurdish Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan: KCK), which is also known as the Group of Communities in Kurdistan, for three years. Karayilan's appointment suggests the possibility of a potentially aggressive position towards Turkey should the ongoing peace negotiations with Ankara break down.

At the same time, the appointment of two hawkish Syrian Kurds - Fehman Hüseyin (alias Bahoz Erdal) and Nurettin Halef Al Muhammed (alias Nurettin Sofi) - to leadership positions as HPG commanders signals the PKK's tilt towards more military action in Syria.

Karayilan was replaced by two Executive Council co-chairs - another PKK co-founder Cemil Bayik (alias Cuma) and Hülya Oran (alias Bese Hozat). By doing so, the PKK has adopted a two-chaired management for the first time in its 39-year history. The group also added new names to the six-member Executive Council, including three Alevi Kurds and one Alevi Turk, to make a strong appeal to the Alevi Kurdish population in Turkey that until now had shied away from supporting the PKK in large numbers. For the first time in PKK history, three women were assigned to the council: Oran, Nuriye Kesbir, and Elif Pazarcik. The nomination of the three women to the Executive Council for the first time signals the PKK's potential 'charm offensive' towards women in an effort to broaden its recruitment.

Finally, the promotion of Bayik, who has built strong ties with the Iranian intelligence agency Vezerat-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (VEVAK) since the 1990s, will help the PKK mend fences with Iran after the group had fought Tehran for almost a decade through its Iranian branch, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê: PJAK). Although the PKK's Syrian franchise - the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat: PYD) - has been actively carving out territory from the opposition in Syria, Bayik's



Iranian ties, together with Hüseyin and Muhammed's appointment as field commanders in Syria, may help the PKK and PJAK to ease tensions with Iran and could even help the group build an alliance with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces against the Syrian opposition.

PKK's organisational structure

The KCK is the political wing of the PKK and the political mechanism that would rule Turkish Kurdistan should it achieve autonomy. Currently, the KCK is responsible for writing a constitution for Kurdistan and building up regional administrative structures. All of its activities are led by the PKK's legislative assembly in Qandil, namely the People's Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel). According to the KCK's charter, its chairman is Abdullah calan - the PKK's leader who has been jailed in Turkey since 1999. The KCK's sub-units consist of legislative-executive-judicial councils.

Kongra-Gel is the legislative branch of the KCK. It acts in accordance with the KCK's charter and has committees responsible for relationships with Europe, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Syria, and Turkey. These committees elect 300 delegates to attend an annual meeting held each April. In 2005, the Executive Council decided to bind the group's Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian affiliates - PJAK, PYD, and Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) - to Kongra-Gel. This happened without the delegates' vote.

The KCK's executive branch is divided into three sections. The centre for People's Defence Force (Hêzên Parastina Gel: HPG) is the KCK's military wing. The centre for economics manages border trade, trafficking, donations, and commercial income from Europe. And the centre for the Leadership Committee is responsible for executing and developing the calan manifesto for establishing an autonomous Kurdistan. In addition to that, there are further specialised centres, such as the centre for policy, the centre for social affairs, and the centre for ideology.

The ultimate authority over the movement always belongs to the HPG, so whoever controls the HPG controls the PKK; currently, this is Karayilan. Meanwhile, control over the political and financial mechanism in Europe translates into authority over Kongra-Gel. This explains the selection of Bayik and Oran as the co-chairs of the new administration, as they are both very experienced in political and European affairs.

New leadership

It has become clear that calan has personally planned the restructuring of the PKK's leadership by writing letters, advising, and consulting on the names with the organisation. There was a continuous exchange of correspondence in 2013 between the PKK's leadership and calan. Separately, calan wrote letters and guidelines to the PKK's women's sub-committees, European posts, and KCK leaders in Qandil. In his last letter to the Executive Council before the July congress, dated March 2013, he shared his views and proposals for a necessary leadership change at some critical levels of the organisation and pressured for Bayik and Oran's assignment as co-chairs, as well for Karayilan to take over the military wing.

The General Council, which will function under the authority of imprisoned calan, will be managed by six members: Bayik, Oran, Karayilan, Mustafa Karasu (alias Hüseyin Ali), Kesbir, and Pazarcik. Other changes taken at the six-day general meeting on northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains include the appointment of Hüseyin and Muhammed in commanding positions under Karayilan, while two prominent figures and PKK co-founders Ali Haydar Kaytan (alias Fuat) and Duran Kalkan (alias Selahattin Abbas) were assigned to more passive, co-ordination posts, due to their age and supposedly poor health.

The new chairman of the PKK's Executive Council, Bayik, a Sunni Turkish Kurd, is known for his close ties with the Iranian Intelligence and Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). Despite being one of the PKK's five co-founders and having commanded PKK units in small-scale fights in 1980s, Bayik does not have a proven reputation as a dedicated fighter, unlike Karayilan. However, Bayik has proven himself as an accomplished planner and a diplomat. Intelligence experts told *IHS Jane's* that his ties with VEVAK have provided the PKK some level of communication with Iraq's Shia leadership.

Co-chair Oran is an Alevi Kurd from Tunceli province's Hozat district in eastern Turkey. She joined the PKK in 1994 and has since





participated in numerous fights against Turkish security forces. She has acted as women's battalion commander and deputy chief of the Qandil training centre. Her past experience in the PKK's women combat units, known as the Free Women's Troops (YJA Star), and women's committees makes her an iconic figure to promote the PKK, drawing on sympathies especially among Kurdish women, Kurdish Alevis in Turkey, and the Kurds in Syria. Therefore, Oran's new PKK position could help draw attention to the Alevis' cultural and human right problems throughout the PKK's regional groups and instil Alevi issues more deeply in the PKK's philosophy. Turkish PKK experts told *IHS Jane's* that Oran's role will be to control the PKK units in the overwhelmingly Kurdish Dersim/Tunceli region, Turkey's only Alevi-majority province and a vital base for the organisation's recruitment and military operations.

The General Council's new female member, Kesbir, is an ethnic Kurd from Mardin province. She was an activist and worked for the PKK's European offices and Kurdish Young Women's Movement (Komalen Ciwan) from the 1990s to 2001. She assisted the PKK's Europe chief Zübeyir Aydar from the group's German and Dutch offices in political activities and demonstrations until her arrest by the Dutch police in The Hague in 2001. Following her release in 2005, she joined the PKK in Qandil and acted as a political advisor to the group's executive board. She was also a women's committee member, which makes her an important figure for the organisation's European strategy and policies.

Another female member, Pazarcik, is an Alevi Kurd from Kahramanmaraş province's Pazarcik district. She joined the PKK as an activist in 1980 at the age of 16. She was repeatedly arrested and released by Turkish security forces - in 1981, 1988, and 1990 - until 1991 when she joined the PKK's camps in northern Iraq. She has actively served as service personnel, unit fighter, and troop commander, as well as managing the Kurdish Women's Movement (Koma Jinen Bilind: KJB) from 2008 to 2013. Her election to the General Council with Oran and Kesbir indicates a new era for the PKK management, with women being involved in the decision-making process.

Karasu is a Turkish Alevi from Sivas province's Gürün district and is one of the PKK co-founders. He is well respected among PKK fighters with Alevi roots and is also known as a serious politician and doctrinaire rather than a fighter. Before calan's arrest and imprisonment in 1999, he served in the organisation's Central Committee in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and carried out envoy duties with the Iranian intelligence from 1993-99. He is known for his close ties with Turkish radical leftist organisations such as Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (Devrimci Halk Kurtulus Partisi-Cephesi: DHKP-C) and Revolutionary Path (Devrimci Yol: Dev-Yol) in the 1990s. Therefore, he is capable of influencing active leftist armed groups in return for reciprocal benefits such as joint operations and training. The DHKP-C is known to have some following among pro-Assad ethnic Arab Alawites in Turkey's southern Hatay province, which may bring some Assad government support to the PKK and to the group's Syrian franchise, the PYD.

Karayilan, a Sunni Kurd, is from the Sanliurfa province's Birecik district. He is a co-founder and one of the most prominent PKK figures. He established the PKK in 1978 with calan in Ankara, and has planned and commanded the organisation's first military operations and co-ordinated its recruitment and training efforts. He is known for having drawn inspiration from Argentine Marxist revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong. Karayilan has written a dozen guerrilla manuals and pioneered the adoption of new military techniques and tactics throughout the PKK during the 1990s. When it was vital for PKK to abandon Syria - just a few months before calan fled to Russia in 1999 - Karayilan established the Qandil region as a permanent base for the group by co-ordinating with Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Karayilan has held lead positions within the PKK even as the organisation's structure has been undergoing constant changes. As an experienced fighter with wide-reaching influence in the PKK's rank-and-file, his last assignment as head of the HPG may be seen as part of an effort to consolidate and unite PKK troops for a coming war and establish enough control over the fighters to prevent any undesired military operations launched by remote groups in Iran, Iraq, Syria, or Turkey.

The Turkish peace process

Although some analysts view the organisation as taking an overall supportive approach to the ongoing peace process with Turkey, these changes in the leadership suggest a different trajectory. Karayilan is now the commander-in-chief of the PKK military. Under him there are two hard-line Syrian Kurds: Hüseyin, who has been acting as HPG deputy commander-in-chief and running the PKK's special operations branch - Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan: TAK), and Nurettin Sofi, the commander of the PKK's Amed and Botan regional commands in Turkey. The two collectively command 2,000 militants and hold HPG Executive Committee membership.

The PKK's new military structure does not favour a permanent peace process. By assigning strong military figures to critical command positions, the PKK is showing itself as willing to establish permanent gains in Syria and potentially northern Iraq, as well as to prepare for the collapse of the peace process in Turkey and Ankara's failure to meet the group's expectations. Should the peace process fail, Turkey will face a stronger and more dynamic PKK.

Syria and the Middle East

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, calan has announced from the Imrali prison in Turkey that the PKK and Syrian Kurds should support anyone who claims to be ready to give the Kurds what they demand. In several media interviews, both Karayilan and PYD leader Salih Muslim have emphasised the importance of political recognition of the Kurds in Syria, highlighting that Kurds are ready to govern themselves and will take necessary measures to protect their territory.

Muslim has followed suit, with the PYD declaring limited autonomy for the Syrian Kurds in July 2013. Further, in November 2013, the PYD announced the establishment of a regional government in Rojava (referring to the Kurdish-populated northern Syria). Although this move stirred anger from Turkey and Barzani's Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the PYD's plans for autonomy remain intact and appear to be making progress.

Following Bayik's assignment as co-leader, there have been some important changes in personnel in the PKK's ranks and in its diplomatic corps. Bayik started with major changes in the PKK media organisations, removing some high-level officials close to Karayilan on 5 December 2013. Those officials include Ahmed Deniz (head of the External Relations Committee); Roj Willard (the PKK's website *Firat* news editor-in-chief); Deyari Qamishlo (media supervisor and head of the Syrian Relations Committee); Havel Damhat (Qandil head co-ordinator); and Haqi Hawal (head of Iran and PJAK media units). As a result of the PKK's 2013 congress and high-level management changes, Karayilan's influence over decision-making has diminished.

Yet, these changes should also be acknowledged as significant indicators of the PKK's intention to promote strong diplomatic and organisational cadres in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. According to Kurdish media sources, Deniz and Qamishlo have been assigned as liaisons to the PYD, where they are assisting and directing Muslim to take necessary measures to prepare the future Syrian Kurdistan's manifesto and governance principles based on the design and decisions given by the Qandil management.

As reported by the Kurdish media in the KRG, Damhat and Hawal are also acting as negotiators to establish some level of diplomatic connections between the PKK, Baghdad, and Tehran. These ties aim to advance assistance to the PYD in order to hasten the defeat of Syria's radical resistance groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), while supporting Assad's military operations as a force multiplier. The PKK's Iranian branch, PJAK, has been almost out of the picture since the beginning of Syria's civil war. Intelligence experts told *IHS Jane's* that this was a sign of the PKK-Iran co-operation.

Hüseyin and Sofi should also be regarded as highly important for the PYD and PKK co-operation with the Assad regime. Both are Syrian Kurds who have had close relations to Syria's Baathist officials and intelligence officials since the early 1990s.

According to Kurdish media reports, both figures left Qandil some time in November 2013. They stationed themselves at Iraqi Kurdistan's western border, close to the Simalka-Al-Qahtaniya region, where they could contact and consult with PYD and Assad liaisons. Considering that the PKK's leadership left Syria in 1999, closing its permanent facilities and training camps in the Bekaa Valley, this alleged "comeback" indicates a serious intent to build new bridges with the Syrian regime.

Hüseyin and Assad have known each other since they were fellow students at Damascus Medical School in 1987. In addition, Hüseyin and Sofi are known to have communicated with Syria's Baath Party officials to develop strategies against their "mutual enemy", Turkey, in the 1990s. This new PKK positioning can be understood as a serious effort to establish beneficial relations with the Syrian government to run an efficient organisation in Syria's Kurdish Rojava region.



The PKK in Syria

Since July 2013, the PKK and the PYD have been strengthening their military presence and combat readiness in Syria by establishing local militia groups supported by experienced PKK units. Intelligence seen by *IHS Jane's* and some media reports indicate that they have established reconnaissance units equipped with off-road motorbikes, long-range sniper rifles, and improvised trucks, loaded with militias carrying RPG-7 anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns, that patrol the main routes to Kurdish territories. This indicates preparations for a future urban war.

According to the Turkish and Kurdish media, approximately 300 PKK fighters have moved from Turkey and Iraq to Syria's northern towns, mainly Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), Derik (Al-Malikiyah), and Afrin regions. In addition, another 200-250 fighters have reportedly moved from Qandil to temporary bases in northern Iraq's mountainous region in order to reinforce and support PKK units positioned in Syria. Military analysts and media reports suggest that Syria's Kurdish-dominated northern towns of Afrin, Azaz, Derik, Jarabulus, Kobani, and Tal Abyad are controlled by Kurdish groups, especially the PYD.

Major confrontations in September and November 2013 between Kurds and anti-Assad resistance groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS in Syria's northern towns of Azaz, Hasakah, Jarabulus, Ras al-Ayn, Sereqani, and Tal Abyad are indicators that future fighting in the region is likely. Moreover, ISIS and the PYD are still trying to control Qamishli and Ras al-Ayn - two border towns with a high volume of trade and business opportunities.

Conclusion

Using a well-balanced diplomacy with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the PKK may build significant ties and co-operation with the Assad regime and Iran. This activity would probably anger Turkey and to some extent Iraq's KRG. Other indicators of a future conflict between the PKK and Turkey include the PKK appealing to the Turkish radical-left groups such as DHKP-C (a group which has traditionally targeted US assets in the country) and relations with Syrian Kurds and ethnic Arab and Turkish Alevis living in Turkey.

Attracting Turkish Alevis, comprising approximately 15% of the country's population, would seriously increase the PKK's numbers and capability. Although they are not strongly related to the nearly eponymous Alawites in Syria, they too are staunchly secular and oppose the Syria policy of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP). If Hatay Arab Alawites rally more forcefully against the government's Syrian policy, Turkish Alevis would almost certainly follow suit. This would constitute a window of opportunity for the PKK to expand its recruitment and make it a far more capable force, especially if it restarts its alliance with the governments of Iran and Syria.

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