

PKK's Changing Tactics and Rhetoric Mimic Insurgencies, Al-Qaida

By

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November 2009

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Abstract: This article discusses the PKK's recent tactics, techniques and procedures, which suggest that the group is learning from Al-Qaida insurgents in northern Iraq. This is an example of the wider contemporary phenomenon of insurgencies learning and adapting skills and strategies employed by terror organizations and militant groups abroad. The article is based on sources from the Turkish and Kurdish media, in addition to the PKK's former website.

Introduction

Some of the methods recently employed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) suggest that the group may be adapting the tactics, techniques, and procedures of groups such as Al-Qaida, Hamas, and the Tamil Tigers. These include the use of simultaneous coordinated attacks (particularly vehicle attacks); suicide bombings; use of the Internet to broadcast videos of hostages; and sophisticated information operations. The PKK's recent efforts to adopt these tactics for use in their fight against Turkey indicates that the Kurdish organization is mimicking the efforts of militant groups in Iraq and elsewhere, and suggests a migration of successful tactics to the PKK's area of operations in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey.

Due to the PKK's base of operation in northern Iraq, it is likely that the organization is closely observing Iraqi insurgents, including those affiliated with Al-Qaida. The PKK and Al-Qaida are not aligned ideologically and there is no evidence of direct cooperation between the two groups. However, the PKK's use of tactics similar to those of Al-Qaida, the proximity of the PKK to Al-Qaida affiliates in Iraq, and the common goal of attacking Turkey shared by both organizations give credence to claims of cross-pollination between the two groups.¹ Such a cross-pollination, coupled with the group's increasingly hostile rhetoric against the U.S. as discussed below, may complicate U.S. interests in the region.

Calling for and Conducting Simultaneous Attacks: Starting in December 2007, the PKK’s “metropolitan arm,” the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), conducted over five dozen car burnings in big cities in Turkey in an apparent reaction to the Turkish military’s cross-border operations into PKK camps in northern Iraq (Figure 1). These were reminiscent of a series of attacks in November 2006 by Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) using car bombs that caused large numbers of fatalities and sowed chaos across Baghdad’s predominantly Shi’a Sadr City neighborhoods. AQI also carried out a series of car bomb attacks in August 2007 targeting Yazidi villages in northern Iraq that left as many as 700 dead.²

Figure 1: Simultaneous Car Bombing Incidents in Turkey.



Source: Zaman.com

The PKK appears to be observing the effects of simultaneous attacks, a trademark of Al-Qaida since the East Africa embassy bombings and the 9/11 attacks. Simultaneous attacks are also equated with a certain level of sophistication for a terror organization or militant group that is often attributed to Al-Qaida, and which the PKK may hope to emulate. Before it was taken down, the PKK mouthpiece Hpg-online.net published an article entitled, “Isn’t it About Time for Sudden and Simultaneous Attacks?” stating that their previous methods of attacking randomly were ineffective and calling for simultaneous attacks:

Burning single cars or the offices of political parties such as the Justice and Development Party or targeting governmental institutions do not produce any results when they are conducted individually/randomly. . . . From now on, the attacks would be more effective if they are conducted in an organized and simultaneous fashion rather than in the form of individual attacks. Instead of burning one or two cars a day or burning one office or institution a week, wouldn’t it be better if we burn 100 cars simultaneously in different cities?³

Suicide Bombings and the Concept of “Martyrdom”: Following the capture of Abdullah Öcalan by Turkish security forces in February 1999, the PKK used suicide bombings between March and August 1999 to pressure Turkey into releasing their imprisoned leader. When the attacks failed to secure his release, Öcalan publicly called for the bombings to end.⁴ However, the PKK appears to have re-adopted suicide bombings as part of its tactical repertoire. This development first occurred on April 10, 2006, when a PKK suicide bomber struck outside a mosque in the Turkish Black Sea town of Ordu.⁵ On May 22, 2007, a suicide bombing occurred at a crowded business center in Turkey’s capital of Ankara (Figure 2).⁶ The attack came shortly after the PKK warned on its website that Turkish economic infrastructure and government officials would be “targeted by a martyr.”⁷ Other statements on the site identifying the target and expounding on the reasons for the act also indicate that the group was behind the bombing.⁸

Figure 2: Bombing Site in Ankara.



Source: Sabah.com

Figure 3: A PKK Suicide Bomber “Martyr.”



Source: Hpg-online.net

Although the PKK has employed suicide bombers in the past, other developments associated with these recent attacks suggest that the organization has closely observed the tactics used by other groups abroad that also utilize suicide bombings against their opponents. For example, the PKK’s earlier suicide bombings killed, on average, fewer than two persons per attack, whereas the numbers of injured in its recent suicide attacks have been in the hundreds, similar to more aggressive suicide bombings taking place in Iraq and other places.⁹ Second, the earlier

individual PKK suicide terrorists did not seek to publicize their act, nor did the organization attempt to promote the life stories of the attackers. However, it is notable that the PKK has recently adopted the term “martyrdom” to extol its suicide bombers and attract new ones through its website. In the past, the PKK never used the term “martyr” or “martyrdom” to refer to its fallen, merely referring to them as “killed.” For instance, a statement from Hpg-online.net, dated February 13, 2008, extolled a former female suicide bomber “martyr” named “Viyan” and stated that other Kurd’s were obligated to continue the “struggle for freedom” (Figure 3):

Continuing Martyr Viyan’s struggle is the obligation of every militant who is fighting for freedom. . . . Remembering Viyan is to purify oneself in the fire that she lit. . . . It is to live and keep alive all her dreams, desires, all the values that she put her life on the line for. Understanding and keeping Viyan alive is a difficult task. But understanding Viyan, living her and keeping her alive is truly an exuberant task.¹⁰

Suicide bombings have been a common tactic used by Al-Qaida, along with the Tamil Tigers, Hamas, and other militant groups. However, the posting of profiles of suicide bombers on militant radical Islamic (MRI) websites is a distinctive recruitment tool for Al-Qaida. Al-Qaida-related MRI sites are typically known to extol the bomber’s “martyrdom” and describe it as the noblest role, emphasizing martyrdom as part of an individual’s obligation to “defend Islamic lands and values.” As such, the PKK’s recent use of suicide bombers employed to cause mass casualties, coupled with its adoption of the concept of martyrdom as an obligation and ideal on behalf of a common struggle, represents another case where the PKK appears heavily influenced by tactics and rhetoric associated with Al-Qaida.

Figure 4: Kidnapped Turkish Soldiers in front of PKK Flag.



Source: Yeniozgurpolitika.net

Use of the Internet and YouTube: Following a PKK attack on Turkish soldiers on October 22, 2007, the group took eight soldiers hostage, and published their pictures in front of the PKK flag in one of its affiliated publications called *Yeni Özgür Politika (New Free Politics)* (Figure 4). The PKK also published interviews with each captive on YouTube in which the captives were apparently forced to make statements against the Turkish military.¹¹

Though kidnapping is not a new tactic for the PKK, their use of the media to publicize the capture of the Turkish soldiers and Internet to broadcast views of the hostages was unprecedented. Posting online videos of hostages is a tactic used by Al-Qaida, along with Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, as part of wider propaganda efforts to publicize the strength of the organization and/or communicate the group's message to an international audience. The PKK released the soldiers after two weeks, along with a statement on their Hpg-online.net entitled, "We Released the Hostage Soldiers!" in which the group claimed that they had treated the captives "...in accordance with international laws." The Internet videos allowed the PKK to portray itself both as capable military force and as a legitimate resistance movement abiding by international laws regarding prisoners of war.¹²

Information Operations / Propaganda Campaigns: Just as Al-Qaida talks about a "Muslim *Ummah* (community/nation)," and claims to represent all Muslims and defend "Islamic lands," the PKK has recently started to claim to represent all Kurds and defend Kurdish lands. Though this is a common message of most nationalist insurgent groups, recent messages by the PKK which highlight the need for "Kurdish national unity" are very reminiscent of Al-Qaida's repeated message of "Islamic unity."¹³ In addition, similar to Al-Qaida's portrayal of the war in

Iraq as a war on all Muslims, the PKK has also recently begun an information campaign to portray Turkish operations against them as a war on all Kurds.¹⁴ In an interview with the Denmark-based Roj TV, a station targeting the Kurdish community in Denmark, Bahoz Erdal, a leading figure in the PKK, asserted that, “The [Turkish Parliament’s] mandate [for a cross-border operation against the PKK] is a declaration of war against all Kurds, and should be perceived as such.”¹⁵ In an interview with Hpg-online.net, he also claimed, “Our nation should know that Turkey’s target is not just the PKK, but all Kurds and that now, more than ever, we need Kurdish national unity.”¹⁶

Figure 5: Osman Öcalan.



Source: Zaman.com

Moving to Lawless Areas: As a result of Turkey’s increased military pressure on PKK camps in northern Iraq, some reports claim that the PKK is looking to move its bases and operations into other locations, possibly in Iran or Armenia.¹⁷ Osman Öcalan, the brother of captured PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, said in a recent interview with the British daily *The Independent* that the group was feeling pressure and was moving to Iran (Figure 5):

The PKK has decreased its presence in the Kurdish regions of Iraq and is moving to Iran to avoid Turkey’s increasing pressure. This is part of a PKK tactic that involves moving to another country when it feels under too much pressure in a particular place . . . there are more and more fighters in Iranian Kurdistan and the Iranian Kurds support the PKK strongly.¹⁸

Meanwhile, the Azeri press agency has reported at the end of 2007 that the PKK leadership had decided to move the organization’s bases from the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq to the Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, a disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁹ According to the Turkish press, intelligence reports also reveal that the PKK is planning to move 10 of its camps from northern Iraq to Karabakh. The reports allege that a

number of PKK gunmen visited 12 Kurdish villages in the Karabakh region and asked the villagers to help them. *Today's Zaman* also reports that a fighter who had escaped from a PKK camp and surrendered to Turkish forces had given important information on the organization's plan to move its camps to Karabakh. Allegedly, the PKK bases would be located in the cities of Shusha, Fizuli, and Lachin.²⁰

Figure 6: PKK's Caption: "Terrorist Partners: Bush and Gül."



Source: Hpg-online.net

The PKK's Changing Messages and Criticism of the U.S.

There has been a dramatic shift in the group's rhetoric regarding the United States prompted by American intelligence assistance to Turkey's cross-border operations against PKK targets. Following former President Bush's declaration of the PKK as "an enemy of the U.S." the group, who was unwilling to antagonize the United States in the past, started to criticize American foreign policy and voice threats against American interests in the Middle East. Recent PKK operations are similar to tactics employed by insurgents and terrorist organizations in Iraq, and this, coupled with the group's increasingly vocal criticisms of the U.S., may negatively impact U.S. interests in northern Iraq and Turkey.

Turkey conducted several cross-border airstrikes and a major ground operation against the PKK in late 2007 and early 2008.²¹ Following the first round of operations, then Army General Yaşar Büyükanıt, chief of the Turkish General Staff, told Turkish mainstream Kanal D television that the precision strikes were in part based on "intelligence provided by the U.S."²² This was likely

a reference to an agreement by former President Bush to provide Turkey with “actionable intelligence” against the PKK during a November 5, 2007 meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in which he declared the PKK an “enemy of the U.S.”²³ Turkish President Abdullah Gül has also expressed that “We [Turkey and the U.S.] are sharing intelligence. Our cooperation suits that of allies. Both sides are happy (Figure 6).”²⁴

After Turkish government and media sources credited the USG with providing intelligence enabling Turkey’s military to strike PKK targets in northern Iraq, PKK media organs responded with bitter criticism of the United States. Both Hpg-Online and the PKK-affiliated *Kurdmedia* began using unusually harsh language to denounce the United States. According to a *Kurdmedia* opinion piece:

[The] U.S. has become a party to aggression against Iraq...the fact that the U.S. gave tacit approval [to the attacks]...shows that U.S. has no respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. . . . It seems that neither the U.S. nor Turkey are interested in a genuine peaceful solution to this conflict . . . the air raids did not amount to anything except for some innocent civilian lives that were tragically lost. The U.S. government must push both parties [the PKK and Turkey] towards dialogue rather than placing meaningless and symbolic labels on one party or another.²⁵

In a December 2007 interview with PKK-affiliated Turkish publication *Özgür Gündem (Free Agenda)*, PKK leader Murat Karayılan accused the U.S. of employing double-standards and claimed that the U.S. was taking responsibility for the attacks:

The U.S.’s policy of double-standards has been revealed. Even though the U.S. has no project regarding the resolution of the Kurdish problem, it has viewed the Kurds as friends or enemies, based on its interests. The U.S., which tried to use the Kurds to overthrow the Saddam regime...is now taking responsibility [for Turkey’s attacks] by providing the necessary means for attacks against northern Kurdistan by partnering with Turkey.²⁶

Shortly after the Turkish cross-border operations started, an Hpg-online article by author Kasim Engin criticized President Bush and boldly stated that it was a source of pride for the PKK to be declared an enemy of the U.S.:

Mr. Bush goes from one end of the world, spreads death to people every day, and compares the killings to the Crusades. . . . In an effort to create a new American world order, he brings bloodshed everywhere. So [what the U.S. is doing in Iraq] is not terrorism, but our struggle is? . . . It is a source of pride for us to be declared a “terrorist organization” and a “common enemy” by this dark country which has done nothing but damage humanity.²⁷

Some articles went beyond criticism of American foreign policy and included threats against the United States. Hpg-Online demanded an end to the attacks, strongly insinuating that the United States would face direct consequences if it did not immediately stop assisting Turkey with its attacks on the PKK. Specifically, it warned, “It is clear that these attacks are happening with U.S. support, approval, and intelligence assistance. The U.S. should stop these attacks immediately. Otherwise, it will attract the fury and reaction of our people and this will lead to new outcomes.”²⁸ Similar threats were voiced within a recent article by author Alişer Koçgiri on Hpg-Online:

The PKK has an anti-imperialist stance and is against the U.S. Americans are openly saying this too. The U.S. clearly stated who their enemies are in the Middle East. . . . The PKK can make the U.S. sorry for ever entering and leaving the Middle East. That is why all the U.S. collaborators are declaring the PKK their “common enemy.”²⁹

On 31 January 2008, *Kurdmedia* printed an “Open Letter to the President George Bush” by the Union of Democratic Kurdish Federations in Europe (KONKURD) which stated that the U.S. policy of declaring the PKK an enemy could put the United States in jeopardy:

By declaring the Kurdish struggle for freedom ‘terrorist’ you are not only insulting the Kurds, but you are also putting them in opposition. The consequence of this is not only the negative effect on the USA’s already tarnished reputation in the Middle East, but it is also in conflict with US interests. By adopting this stance, you are becoming the

collaborators of Turkey's policies of assimilation and annihilation. . . . We simply cannot understand on what foundations you are basing your claims. The PKK, in its thirty year struggle, has not targeted a single American citizen or American interests. On 17th November, your assistant to the Foreign Secretary Matthew Bryza . . . acknowledged that 'the PKK had not attacked a single American, and declaring the PKK an enemy would only put us at risk.'³⁰

This change in PKK rhetoric towards the United States may be an indication of the group's increasingly precarious position in northern Iraq as it struggles to counter the combination of Turkish military power and U.S. intelligence. This shift probably reflects two interrelated PKK goals following its recent reverses in the field. First, the PKK may be increasingly desperate to portray itself as a strong and organized "resistance" force to other Kurds, and is employing anti-American rhetoric to rally support from Kurdish populations in northern Iraq and the Kurdish Diaspora. Second, by threatening the United States, the PKK is attempting to convince American policymakers that alienating their organization will threaten wider U.S. interests in the region, prompting Washington to halt its intelligence support of Turkish military operations. Although the PKK faces significant obstacles in realizing these goals, these statements represent a significant shift in the PKK's rhetoric regarding the United States from a tacit position of neutrality to a stance of open hostility against both U.S. foreign policy and American interests in the Middle East.

Why This is Important to the U.S.

The PKK is observing and learning tactics from other insurgent groups, most notably from Iraq and Al-Qaida, and is becoming more sophisticated in the process. The Turkish mass daily *Sabah* has claimed that Al-Qaida was collaborating with the PKK, noting, "Some groups from the PKK

have started to collaborate with Al-Qaida. The alliance between the PKK and Al-Qaida is a nightmare which is getting stronger in northern Iraq.”³¹ Terror experts have also reported that some degree of “cross-pollination” between Kurdish insurgents and Al-Qaida operatives has taken place.³² Though the PKK and Al-Qaida are not aligned ideologically, the latter has reportedly sought to set up bases in the mountains of northern Iraq, which is often viewed as representing the PKK heartland. Ansar al-Islam, Al-Qaida’s predominantly Kurdish MRI ally, has also sought refuge there in the past.³³ This proximity and common enmity towards Turkey suggest a possible basis for cooperation between the PKK and Al-Qaida.

There are also reports that Al-Qaida is courting the PKK to exploit their knowledge of Turkish security vulnerabilities.³⁴ According to a report in the English-language *The New Anatolian*, Al-Qaida has tried to form an alliance with the PKK:

[Iraqi Kurdish security officials] said Al-Qaida has been trying to court the PKK. “Al-Qaida has contacted the PKK leaders several times trying to form an alliance but until now the PKK has resisted the temptation to join forces with the Islamic radicals,” they reported.... Analysts say the PKK knows that if it forms any kind of links with the Islamic radicals it would attract the wrath of the Americans and they would not try to do that.³⁵

Furthermore, *El Arab*, a Qatar newspaper, has written that the Al-Qaida organization in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and the PKK have started conducting meetings on “military coordination and cooperation.” An article which appeared in the newspaper in March 2008 apparently claims that one of the leaders of Al-Qaida, Sheik Ebu Halil Bahadili, discussed the details of the alleged agreement with the newspaper’s Baghdad reporter. The alleged agreement says that the PKK will provide shelter and weapons to Al-Qaida militants in Diyala, Mosul and Kirkuk; and facilitate their movement from northern Iraq. In exchange, Al-Qaida will provide the PKK with

intelligence. In the article, Bahadili is alleged to have highlighted that the start of negotiations with the PKK did not mean that the groups share the same ideology. In addition, Bahadili apparently also mentioned that the collaboration between the groups have already yielded concrete results, pointing to the attack on March 10, 2008 in Sulaymania Palace which killed two and wounded 30 people. It is worth noting that the Kurdish armed group named Kurdistan Brigades recently pledged allegiance to Al-Qaida. The Brigade had claimed responsibility for attacks on Peshmerga (armed Kurdish fighters) check points.³⁶

Why should the U.S. be concerned about this? There are reports that claim that an Al-Qaida-PKK cooperation lies behind the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, which took place in late November 2008 (Figure 7). Although security sources suggest the attack was carried out by Al-Qaida, it is far from having the hallmarks of the organization. This has triggered the intelligence services and security officials to question whether Al-Qaida has the support of another organization. The signals and developments in the months prior to the attack and due to reasons mentioned earlier, it appears that this support may have come from the PKK. Many allege that the two organizations, under increasing pressure from both Turkish and American intelligence services, seem to undertake cooperation, in which Al-Qaida is likely to be using the PKK as a “subcontractor.”³⁷

Figure 7: The U.S. Consulate in Istanbul.



Source: Sabah.com

The PKK’s adoption of tactics used by other groups reflects two things. First, the sophistication of the organization is increasing, as it attempts to expand both its ideological agenda and

operational reach. Second, this is a repercussion of the wider contemporary phenomenon of insurgencies learning and adapting skills and strategies employed by terror organizations and militant groups abroad. A scenario in which the PKK was interacting directly with Al-Qaida in Iraq would complicate U.S. interests in Iraq and the region, and hinder the U.S.'s Overseas Contingency Operations.

NOTES

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