

How Can Europe Address its PKK Problem?

By Dr. Soner Cagaptay

December, 2006

On October 1, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization on the European Union (EU)'s list of terrorist organizations, declared a unilateral ceasefire in its long campaign against Turkey. Since then, however, the PKK has killed dozens of Turks. Because the PKK enjoys an extensive support network in Europe, many Turks see Europe responsible for harboring and enabling anti-Turkish terror. The PKK violence should be a concern for the Europeans as the organization's terror campaign is ripping Turkey away from Europe and wrecking havoc across the continent. How can Europe counter the PKK issue?

Background

The PKK declared a previous unilateral ceasefire after Turkey captured its leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1998. At that time, the group moved its terrorists to northern Iraq, changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK), and proclaimed a peaceful agenda. With quiet in place, the Turkish government launched reforms on the Kurdish issue, providing for Kurdish-language broadcasts and education. To satisfy EU accession rules, the Turkish parliament eliminated capital punishment, consequently sparing Ocalan's life. In August 2003, Turkey passed an amnesty law, providing the group's members a chance to leave the PKK.

None of this has placated the organization. The war in Iraq enabled the PKK to consolidate itself in northern Iraq. Accordingly, the group changed its name PKK-Kongra-Gel (Kurdistan People's Congress) and abandoned the cease-fire in June 2004 in order to take advantage of the safe haven it has established in northern Iraq where it has over 3,500 terrorists.

Since then, in sustained almost daily attacks, the PKK has killed many people. On August 27 and 28, for instance, the PKK bombed targets in Istanbul and the resort cities of Antalya and Marmaris, killing three people and wounding more than 100, including a number of European citizens. For Europeans, the PKK may seem a Turkish internal matter. In fact, its activities stretch beyond Turkey and directly affect Europe's interests.

The PKK in Europe

If one of the chief ingredients of terror is people willing to kill, the other is money to support such people and their activities. In this regard, the PKK thrives thanks to an extensive network inside the EU:

- Various PKK leaders, including Hidir Yalcin, Riza Altun, Zubeyir Aydar, and Ali Haydar Kaytan all live in Europe. According to Europol officials, these PKK activists coordinate fundraising for the organization, often through extortion, kidnappings, and political campaigns.
- Europol officials also confirm that the PKK has put down deep roots inside Europe. Using a network established in the 1990s to smuggle terrorists from Turkey into sympathetic European safe havens, the organization has established a significant presence in criminal activity, trafficking drugs, smuggling illegal immigrants into the EU, and running prostitution rings to raise funds.
- The PKK also maintains training camps in the EU. In November 2004, Dutch security forces shut down a PKK training camp in Liempde, arresting twenty-nine people who were, according to Dutch authorities, training to conduct attacks in Turkey.
- In addition, the PKK has an impressive array of media and propaganda arms in the EU, including Danish-based TV networks, Roj-TV and Mezopotamya TV, pro-PKK Ozgur Politika newspaper in Germany, and “information offices” in Italy, Germany, France, and Belgium

The Big Picture

For the following reasons, the PKK issue should be of concern to Europe:

- Most Turks know someone killed as a result of PKK violence, and renewed PKK violence is creating massive amounts of anti-European resentment in Turkey.
- While the PKK issue is ripping Turkey away from Europe, it is bringing Turkey closer to Iran. In the past, Iran's theocratic regime, which is diametrically opposed to Turkey's secular, pro-western society, saw the PKK as a useful tool with which to wreck havoc in Turkey. Accordingly, Tehran allowed PKK bases such as Haj Umran, Dar Khala, Benchul, and Sirabad in its territory. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the PKK crossed from these bases into Turkey, killing civilians. Iran's policy of war by proxy, the use of the PKK to undermine Turkey's secular system, has recently come to a strategic halt. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, Tehran, which feels the pressure of European (and American) efforts to undermine its nuclear ambitions, has revamped its PKK policy. To counter Western isolation, Iran has launched a policy of courting Ankara and winning the Turks' hearts. In this regard, Tehran is taking advantage of European (and U.S.) inaction against the PKK by launching attacks against Qandil and the very PKK camps Iran had allowed in the 1990s. These steps are helping Tehran build a positive image in Turkey: not a day goes by without the Turkish press running another positive article about Iran, while lambasting Europe (and the U.S.) on the PKK issue.

- Finally, the PKK represents a law and order problem for Europe. The organization's aforementioned trans-European network functions as a criminal "PKK expressway," providing easy access from Northern Iraq to Paris, Berlin, and London. This PKK expressway sustains violence, while threatening law and order in Europe. British security officials estimate that the PKK smuggles forty percent of the heroin going from the east into the EU annually, calculated to be worth five billion dollars by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime. François Haut, director of the Department for the Study of the Contemporary Criminal Menace in Paris, says that the PKK is responsible for up to 80 percent of narcotics trafficked into the Parisian suburbs. European intelligence analysts add that the PKK's fund raising activities on its criminal expressway also include the trafficking of illegal immigrants, another major source of concern for Europe.

What can Europe do?

Shutting down the PKK's fundraising structures is an effective way of dealing with the multiple PKK threats to Europe. In addition, cracking down on the group's criminal activities and arresting PKK leaders would be very effective in crippling the organization's European network.

Another useful step would be the elimination of the PKK networks Roj TV and Mezopotamya TV. Europe has already shown leadership in moving against terrorist-controlled media, such as Hezbollah-operated television station al-Manar. The EU decided that this network violated its Television Without Frontiers directive, which prohibits broadcasts that contain any incitement to hatred on the grounds of race, sex, religion or nationality. At the direction of the French, Spanish and Dutch governments, four European satellite providers terminated their broadcasting of al-Manar.

Ironically, despite Brussels designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization (in contrast to Hezbollah, which is not on the EU list), the EU continues to permit the broadcasting of both PKK TV channels on the Hot Bird 3 satellite owned by the French company Eutelsat. This is the same satellite company which correctly terminated its broadcasting of Hezbollah TV. The same outrage that prompted European governments to take action against Hezbollah TV should be directed against PKK TV, whose airwaves transmit messages of incitement to violence against Turkish citizens.

Losing Turkey would be a great shame for Europe at a time when Turkey's credentials as a Western-oriented country provide the continent with the hope of debunking the argument of a clash of civilizations. Additionally, given that terror is the biggest national security threat to Europe, it would be an even bigger tragedy if Europe lost Turkey because of the PKK – and, moreover, lost it to Tehran.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He also teaches at Georgetown University. This policy analysis is based on a briefing Dr Cagaptay gave at the Transatlantic Institute on 22 November 2006.