

## **Kurdish Conundrum and Surmounting PKK Terrorism: A Lengthy Challenge for Turkey**

### **1. Introduction**

The PKK is today's one of the most savage terrorist organizations adopting a revolutionist Marxist-Leninist ideology in the southeast part of Turkey. It aims to weaken and divide Turkey with actions based on violence, makes no distinction in killing the innocent inhabitants of the region, and tries to subdue the people by terror and pressure (Turkish Defense White Paper, 2000). Indeed, the wide range of violent atrocities it has committed include the ones who have Kurdish ethnic background and as in the case of Pınarcık, a Kurdish village not supportive of its case, it did not hesitate to pitilessly kill an entire population in June 1987.

There is no hesitation that the determined warfare of Turkey vis-à-vis PKK terrorist organization will persist until the latter's -and probable replacers'- complete extinction would be achieved. Maybe not even a single issue exists within the Turkish society as consolidative as PKK terror. There is a nondecreasing political stamina among the policy-makers regardless of their ideological views, complete determination in the armed forces, and an endless patience and sacrifice among the populace in the battle against terror. However, it is hard to argue that the ways in which the Turkish policy makers handle PKK terrorism have been thoroughly fruitful despite the remarkable altruism of the society and social coherence with regards to the calamity over the last two decades.

This paper aims to provide an in-depth strategy in facing the plague of terror, albeit its elusive structure fed mainly by global hypocritical policies and the lack of an internationally recognized definition of terrorism, while the aggrieved millions remain to have been the targets and payors of the ill. It certainly does not intend to solve such a complicated issue all at once

and will avoid to fall into a trap of offering one-sided suggestions which might very well have regional and international implications. Hence, while the purpose is to initiate a policy process change, it will attempt to address the constraints and opportunities of the multilateral world as well. In addition, considering the parties who are likely to oppose and who can act as allies carries significant importance in shaping building blocks of tough policies. In any case, policy makers have to pay utmost attention prior making arduous decisions particularly when the responsibility at stake is to defend the nation and take the necessary steps to protect their citizens.

## **2. Domestic actions: “Sweeping in front of own door”**

The first domestic strategy is the need of persuasion of Turkish civilian and military leaders of the fact that terror, while using every ruthless tools in convincing the adversary, is a tactic; thus, an institutional response to resolve the issue should be much broader than pure power usage. Whereas the use of force is a must and leading means in deterring the foe, the resources, rationales, and methods of Kurdish terrorists go beyond the mechanisms of force and require an extensive set of policies apart from hard power. Over the last two decades, general stance of the civilian leaders -for better or worse- has been the tendency of assigning the whole battle to the armed forces. Such an effortless move causes to;

- Narrow the spectrum of alternatives.
- Get into a deceptive relief -as in the case of late 1990s when the terrorist organization stumbled thanks to superb performance of the Turkish Armed Forces- in not establishing subsequent democratic and economic policies.
- Draw a lot of criticism from the outsider actors, some of whom are current or potential allies and whose help and cooperation have been regularly asked in dealing with the ill.

What is desperately needed is *unilateral* and surprising moves on governmental side to come up with social and economic improvements in the region aiming to create a more democratic climate, boost employment, and bring economic and political stability so that sanctuaries of terror can be removed and constant flows of recruits for the PKK can be stopped. More often than not, the democratic improvements have been realized either following the persuasions of military officials or the pressure from outside, particularly from EU and US, which resulted in decreasing credibility of civilian authorities in the eyes of the region's people that any advancement is conditional upon exogenous factors.

Insistence on courageous political steps towards a freer society regardless of the relations with the European Union would also serve as a catalyst in assisting -mainly western allies- to be fully aligned with Turkey in her demands such as the shutting down of PKK-sympathizer Roj TV in Denmark, which will also be touched upon in the following sections. Needless to say, sending a strong message to Turkish people that democratization has nothing to do with the demands of EU negotiations carries significant importance. It should be transparent that more democracy, without any single hesitation, is for the betterment of Turkish people and only because they thoroughly deserve it.

The second move, building on the first one, is to create a holistic approach and bring forth a full package rather than piecemeal solutions, which brings in mind a bothering hesitation: Whether the capacity to solve the issue really exists. For instance, when a government changes a law or amends the constitution in an attempt to provide more rights to the citizens, virtually all the time one aspect of the issue falls short; it is either allowing to open private Kurdish-language courses or to allow the parents to give Kurdish-like names to their children or to reduce the national threshold in the elections to allow the nonviolence-supporting Kurdish groups. While it

is perfectly justifiable for the policy makers to be concerned that every move would be taken insufficient anyway, raising the democratic bars in the sake of democracy itself should be the rationale to dismiss probable future criticisms both domestically and internationally.

The next step, though a complex one, involves the government making a clear distinction between the PKK-sympathizers and Kurdish-origin inhabitants. This has been one of the most challenging tasks of judicial and military authorities over the years. The suspicion of Turkish public of the region's people in regard to their covert support for the organization has had a poisonous impact on the relations and acted as a limiting factor between the parties and destroyed the notion of security. Thus, lessening the anxiety and suspicion became nothing but "wishful thinking" whereas the chances for creating a more predictable climate concerning the behaviors of the parties have been significantly reduced. No question that such a move requires enormous amount of patience and attention; yet, the ability of the government in cutting off the cord between the region's people and the terrorist organization will be a determining factor in ameliorating the tension and help the state show its compassionate face to its discouraged citizens. In order to make the distinction between the organization and innocent Kurdish-origin inhabitants who are squeezed between their peaceful intentions and the wrath of PKK, there is greater need than ever to increase the intelligence capacity and compensate intelligence services' spending needs so that they will not be affected by budget austerity.

Fourth, there is a great need for increased and coherent public diplomacy, mainly for citizens from Kurdish ethnic background but also for outsiders as well. The PKK has been active in making a false propaganda to the people of the region that its mission involves a fight for their freedom. The US Special Envoy for Countering the PKK, Joseph Ralston, in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Europe (2007) ably

notes that “the PKK has sought to hide its terrorist roots by cloaking its political demands in terms of local cultural and linguistic rights.” Ironically, the continued brutality of terrorist organization counterworks as a destabilizing tool against the democratic, economic and social progress of the very same Kurdish originated people. I contend that it would be innumerable essential to increase the dose of public diplomacy, encompassing the tribes, remote villages and surely the large cities, led by Diyarbakır.

One of the most undesired scenarios is that a vacuum in the domestic politics of the region would encourage PKK to “cloak itself in the mantle of Kurdish rights”, as Ralston mentions. This must not be allowed and the regional sympathy between the people and the organization, while decreasing, must be completely disconnected. Having said that, the public diplomacy efforts should also include the recognition of the role of local leaders who are vividly supportive of anti-terrorist measures and methods. Popularizing these emerging leaders in the eyes of their followers who are searching ways to break the ongoing impasse while paying utmost attention to avoid public suspicions obliges strong leadership both on governmental side and arguably more on that of local leaders who must overtly condemn the atrocities committed by the terrorist organization. Public diplomacy should also embrace increased efforts in community-based social programs undertaken with a common initiative of local people and military. Finally, these efforts can include the exemplification of the fact that, presently, there are many politicians and senior bureaucrats from the southeast region in the civilian administration and high ranks of the military.

### **3. Bilateral relations and actions**

#### **A. With USA**

Arguably, the most substantial strategy involves bilateral relations with the United States who has explicit national interests in the region. Turkey must make it clear to American counterparts that she is tremendously uncomfortable of the Kurdish terrorist existence and their troubleless accommodation. The recommended strategy is to pressure Americans to set a *concrete* calendar for *concrete* action which would include certain timelines either to satisfy security concerns of Turkey by the help of American contingents or to leave the option open for the Turkish part to use its own political and military discretion.

United States has been active more than ever in Northern Iraq and needless to say, the area where peshmerga groups settled are under virtually complete control of American troops since the second Iraqi war. PKK sanctuaries mainly in the foothills of Mount Qandil (or Kandeel) are creating tension and increasing the level of strain between the two old allies. According to Brandon (2006) who had first-hand observations from his March 2006 visit to Kurdish camps on Mount Qandil, the PKK controls a roughly 50 square kilometer area which contains around a dozen Kurdish villages. From his interview with Assad Abdul Rahman Chaderchi, member of PKK leadership council, the author points out that “the PKK operates Mount Qandil more as a mini-state rather than a simple ‘training camp’. While weapons training does take place and forms an important part of training for new recruits, the PKK puts great emphasis on ideological training.” He also affirms that “the camp is purposely situated far from the frontlines and its primary role today is to act as a safe haven for Kurds from Turkey and further afield” and “PKK publicity photographs ... show Soviet-era anti-aircraft guns, RPGs and heavy machine guns.”

The main constraint is the recent American interests in working with Kurdish groups in the region. The reason behind this alignment was the Turkish Parliament's rejection in March 2003 to allow its territory to be used as a springboard for a northern front during the second Iraqi war. Hence, both before and after the toppling of Saddam, America needed to have a strong alliance in Northern Iraq while she was busy with the center and south of the country and dealing with Sunni-Shia conflict as well as insurgency. Many analysts contend that, despite the argument's challengeable merits, this left no choice for US but align with Kurdish peshmerga groups to clinch the solidarity of a new ally.

The second constraint, mainly stemming from the first one, is the steadily souring relations between Turkey and United States. Probably the most poisonous contribution to this chilling came in July 2003 during the detention of 11 Turkish soldiers by American forces in Iraq. The heavy-handed way of Americans who handcuffed and hooded the Turkish soldiers in the manner of Al Qaeda suspects caused a nationwide fury in Turkey. Coupled with Muslim civilian deaths in Iraq, the outrage in Turkey turned into a strong anti-American public opinion, which, this time, has made Americans frustrated about their long lasting ally.

The third is the increasing incompatibility of Turkish strategic interests with those of United States. Dobbins et al (2003) assert that Turkey -along with Iran and Syria- has "the ability to intervene to shape Iraqi politics ... the United States therefore needs to take unequivocal responsibility to prevent them from becoming involved in significant overt or covert intervention in Iraqi affairs." In a period when high politics has started to play a disruptive role, however, "[t]he United States should also establish a consultative framework, which would give all Iraq's neighbors a forum in which to voice their legitimate concerns over the nation's future and to be kept abreast of U.S. plans and intentions." Hence, despite all ups and downs, dauntless

efforts of diplomacy to seek for the smallest common denominator is the only choice in such a tense climate.

Nevertheless, it should not, after all, be allowed that the constraints capture the bilateral relations when the historical background of the relationship and apparent opportunities of the future are taken into consideration. Following the fall of Saddam, the two sides can form a new setup in the region where Turkey has been recognized as the most powerful and politically stable actor. Second, there is a huge need for infrastructure and there are countless trade opportunities because of long negligence of the region. With its dynamic economy and geographical proximity, Turkey offers bright prospects for the region. Last but not least, the size, power, and strength of Turkish state vis-à-vis tribal Kurdish groups will make it very transparent for the American counterparts as to which side can be more reliable both today and in the future. Whereas they should certainly be aware of the weight of their allies, given their stance of the last four years, Washington policy makers need to be reminded once again that, as an ally, Kurdish groups are certainly not a substitute of Turkey.

It is not easy to change the directions of major policies, especially when the national interests are at stake. However, Turkey should actively search to see whether it is possible to overturn recent American policies in Northern Iraq and seek if any alternatives are present on American side. This should go beyond the political circles and US inspirations should be discussed in American think-tanks, universities and NGOs as well. As the Americans already have the cooperation of Kurdish groups in the region, Turkey should actively negotiate and constructively offer as to how she can fill a probable vacuum in lieu of slippery Kurdish establishment.

## **B. With Iraq and Northern Iraq Kurdish groups**

The current status of the relations among Turkey, Iraqi officials and Iraqi Kurds is based on nearly complete distrust. The leading factor is the unacceptability of Iraqi territory being used as a safe haven for the PKK. Turkey is rightfully asking Iraqi officials to take the necessary steps to impede PKK terrorists leaking from Northern Iraq to the southeast Turkey. However, the opportunities have to be laid out more profoundly so that the distrust and suspicion could be replaced with mutual benefits. The main strategy is to persuade the Iraqis -including the Kurds- that, as Ralston asserts, “the continued existence of the PKK as a terrorist organization works against Iraq’s best interests” and Turkey is the main candidate in Iraqis’ search to find a reliable partner, not only politically but economically as well. This move involves a “soft power” attitude and needs to be combined with “hard-core” undertakings, because of the multiple dimensions of the issue, such as pressuring the Iraqi government to take *concrete* action and explicitly pointing to the consequences in the case of non-compliance. In brief, it is a ‘carrot and stick’ strategy.

As given above with regards to bilateral relations with America, Turkey offers a significant commercial potential besides its contracting experience which summed to 324 international projects in 25 countries in 2006, reaching a contracting volume of 12.7 billion dollars (Turkish Contractors Association). Turkey should emphasize the opportunities between the two neighboring countries and call for a *common trade initiative*, including a Turkish involvement in providing long-term loans for major infrastructural projects. As Ralston mentions, Northern Iraq is already filled with Turkish construction companies completing the new infrastructure of the region while the shelves of the stores are full of Turkish products and the roads are full of trucks carrying fuel refined in Turkey. Indeed, it is argued that Turkey has

the second highest death toll in Iraq after the Americans -despite the fact that it has no military presence- because of its businesses' existence in the region. Finally, Turkey also needs to call for a task force of a civilian group, including businesspeople, scholars, media members and local persons who would bring together the commonalities rather than the differences in paving the way to form a mutual trust.

The second step should include a strong call to the Iraqi government to make a public statement for the condemnation of armed PKK peshmergas' existence in Northern Iraq, and moreover, to command the closure of PKK offices in the region provided that Iraqi president Jلال Talabani -founder and Secretary General of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)- has a high leverage on Iraqi Kurds. The third and final strategy is to force central Iraqi government to move toward a concrete stance against the Makhmour refuge camp, which became a sanctuary for PKK terrorists. As in the case of Turkish-American bilateral relations, here again should Turkey lay out her determination for the clearance of all PKK personnel as well as the removal of all arms from the camp while remind the counterparts her rights arising from international law. Article 51 of UN Charter is very explicit in acknowledging that “[n]othing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations.” Turkey has every right to intervene in Northern Iraq should the reluctance of Iraqi officials to halt PKK activities continue, and Iraqi government must be very clearly reminded these rights.

### **C. With European Union**

From the stand point of simplicity, the sourish relations between Turkey and various European states are classified under the rubric of European Union. European countries and their actions

vis-à-vis PKK have virtually always been hesitant. First off, PKK's terrorist identity has been recognized by the leading European states, namely United Kingdom, France and Germany, and the organization's activities and auxiliary branches are prohibited in 1993 by France and Germany. Nevertheless, one way or another, PKK has managed so far to disguise its bloody operations by using the justification of self-defense, identity preservation and humanitarian causes, all of which are strictly dismissed at governmental and diplomatic level in the above countries.

However, the patchy way they presented caused suspicions and precluded the formation of a mutually beneficial cooperation. One good example is that the European Union only recognized PKK as a terror group in May 2002; ironically it was one month after the group changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and no longer formally existed. Another striking example is the operation of French and Belgian police in February 2006 when they arrested more than a dozen senior members of the PKK; nevertheless, it was within days when the authorities started to release many of the captured terrorists. And finally comes the trouble of Roj TV, a satellite television station based in Denmark since 2004 which is a major part of PKK's European operations. The station often broadcasts lengthy PKK press conferences and interviews with PKK foot soldiers in Mount Qandil (Brandon, 2007). Indeed, on 16 November 2005, Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan walked out of a joint press conference with his Danish counterpart Anders Fogh Rasmussen because Danish authorities would not remove representatives of the PKK's Roj TV propaganda arm from the meeting hall.

The main strategy toward the European countries is to make their perceived security threat very explicit and provide concrete intelligence findings. This is what causes the

Europeans to act quickly. One instance is the case of PKK 'training camp' near Liempde in the Netherlands when, in November 2004, Dutch authorities discovered that Kurds were being trained to carry out attacks in Turkey, and subsequently, they started a police operation when they arrested 29 Kurds and closed the camp (Brandon, 2007). Another strategy is to use one European country's previous act as a political and legal precedent in convincing the other. Two big successes of Turkey were to convince British authorities to close down Med TV, a pro-PKK satellite station and to persuade the French to shut down its substitute Medya TV in 2004.

There are constraints, however. The German government prohibited *Özgür Politika* newspaper because of the evidence that it was associated with Kongra-Gel, a peripheral organization of PKK; however, the decision was overturned by a court merely a month later. One other constraint is internal political dynamics coupled with poor leadership causing the emerge of an antagonistic attitude toward the immigrants, foreigners and Muslims across the Europe which has been turning into anti-Islamic campaigns, such as Prophet Muhammad cartoon controversy in Denmark. The third tiresome issue is the plan that Roj TV is setting up; that is, the preparations to launch a new station -Newroz TV- which will broadcast in Persian and Kurdish, and work with PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan), the PKK's Iranian sister organization, according to *Hürriyet* newspaper in Turkey. Whereas the issue is not directly associated with European countries, it is no mind reading to see that the new channel will be welcomed by the United States because of its persistent support for pro-democratic Iranian media. The final constraint is the increasing sympathy for Iraqi Kurds in Europe arising both from the changing perceptions of big powers about the region, by regarding Kurds warmer than before, and the conventional sympathy of European peoples toward self-determination, as if the PKK's rhetoric of battling for local cultural and linguistic rights has merits. The truth is that

Turkey has been rarely successful in reaching out European public with its rightful case of battling with terror, which automatically points to the final strategy that convincing policy-makers would be absolutely easier with a promising public diplomacy at the citizen level.

The first opportunity existing here is the political motives of United States. As Brandon (2007) suggests, America has assisted Turkey in pressuring the European Union; nonetheless, its move only stemmed from an attempt of discharging some of its obligations to Turkey. United States anticipated that by siding with the Turks in taking action against PKK in Europe, it can create a space to maneuver and postpone taking a much tougher action in Northern Iraq to close down PKK camps. Another opportunity, on the other hand, is that in the case of a failure of persuading the European Union to arrest senior PKK members, Turkey and the United States can be encouraged to consider more radical solutions, including military strikes, and Turkey may change its plans to take military action vis-à-vis PKK and hit Mount Qandil headquarters in Northern Iraqi (ibid).

#### **4. Funding of terror**

It is no mystery that the terrorist organization has been paying its utmost attention to find financial resources for its existence. The PKK finances itself by organizing aid campaigns through its auxiliary organizations in Europe, racketing, human trafficking, and engaging in drug smuggling. In fact, the revenues from drug smuggling constitute arguably the largest share of the organization, which later are used to purchase weapons, ammunition and various equipment. Whereas the European authorities have a general tendency toward dismissing Turkish claims of PKK involvement in crime, the claims often turn out to be correct. As in the case of Abdullah Baybaşın, a Turkish Kurd who was convicted of drug-related charges in the United Kingdom,

British police at his trial said that he had controlled up to 90 percent of the United Kingdom's heroin trade by working with the PKK's network of followers in Turkey and Europe (The Independent, 17 February 2006). On the other hand, according to Michael Radu (2004), a specialist in terrorist groups worldwide and co-chairman of Foreign Policy Research Institute's Center on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and Homeland Security, PKK's annual income is estimated to be around \$86 million, again received mainly from drug trafficking, robberies, extortion, and emigrant and arms smuggling.

Taking a step in this issue is as critical as being exhaustive. It is critical because turning off the tap of the PKK's revenues is virtually a prerequisite in the battle with the organization. It is exhaustive since at the governmental level, the European authorities are more than aware of their international liabilities. Yet, no matter how much tiresome, the strategy should still be to get international support to push for full compliance with UN resolutions. Security Council Resolution 1269, adopted on 19 October 1999, "calls upon all States to take, inter alia, in the context of such cooperation and coordination, appropriate steps to prevent and suppress in their territories through all lawful means the preparation and financing of any acts of terrorism; ... deny those who plan, finance or commit terrorist acts safe havens by ensuring their apprehension and prosecution or extradition." The opportunity, however, is the compelling proof which abundantly exists. There are numerous organizations, media organs and online services supporting PKK and its successors. To name a few, as Cagaptay and Cem (2005) point;

- Kurdishinfo.com, one of the most effective pro-PKK organizations in Europe, is hosted in Brussels and has its headquarters in Neu Isenburg, Germany.
- Kurdistan Youth Freedom Movement (TECAK), an extremely violent group whose website is hosted in Denmark. The website itself reveals that the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons

(TAK), TECAK's auxiliary, has carried out a number of attacks in Turkey, including four bombings in Istanbul and a bus bombing Kuşadası in which five people were killed, including one Briton and one Irish citizen.

- Kongra-Gel, a website belonging to PKK, is hosted in Düsseldorf, Germany.
- Kurdistan Italia, another website hosted in Arezzo, Italy, soliciting donations to be sent to UIKI-Onlus (*Ufficio d'Informazione del Kurdistan in Italia Roma*).
- Sardasht TV, which has links to Roj TV, has a website hosted in Osthammars, Sweden.
- Freedom for Öcalan, which is based in Cologne, Germany.
- Denge-Mezopotamya, a Kurdish website which is hosted in Berlin, has links to many PKK-affiliated sites.

The second opportunity in dealing with PKK's funds is the changing international posture against terrorism, particularly in the aftermath of September 11. First, PKK's actions have been increasingly criticized by human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which proves that its initial mission of protecting the rights of Kurds in Turkey is completely discredited. Second, the European Union agreed on a set of acts with its Arab Mediterranean neighbors and Israel on 29 November 2005 to fight with terrorism heartily. This move can be much beneficial since it creates a quasi regional regime in combating terrorism. The third and final opportunity is the coordination of efforts of Washington, Brussels, and Ankara within the European Counter Terrorism Group, a body of all EU member states as well as Norway and Switzerland, which can "help alleviate Europe's major counterterrorism problem." (ibid) Bringing the transatlantic partners together provides a new political ground for global governance in which the fragmented efforts can add up to unfold a clear aggregate picture.

## **5. The importance of terror in global governance and concluding remarks**

Waging war against terrorism is an extremely complicated task which requires tremendous amount of patience and dedicated work. It has, therefore, been aimed throughout the paper to build multiple-tier policy strategies encompassing domestic, regional and international actors. Given the significance of internal policies on alienating the focal points of terrorism, the paper embarked upon a self-criticizing posture questioning the sustainability of current policies despite the remarkable sacrifice of civilian and military resources, led by thousands of victims and interminable pains. It, then, moves on bilateral relations with the United States, Iraq and Northern Iraq Kurdish groups, and the European Union. Starting from the neighbors and expanding to traditional allies or partners, each circle represents a unique structure including distinct or overlapping constraints as well as opportunities. The entangled connections between minor and major players and changing national interests complicate the battle against terror, in particular, when rhetoric is replaced with actions.

According to Turkish Defense White Paper (2000), Turkey has bilateral cooperation agreements against terrorism with 33 countries which aim cooperation both at bilateral and international level vis-à-vis organized crimes, smuggling of drugs and psychotropic substances. In addition, Turkey is a signatory of 11 basic international agreements in the fight against various types of terrorism. Nonetheless, it is hard to argue that international cooperation has been much fruitful in deactivating terrorism. As Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reveals (2005), not only is mutual legal assistance still weak in the crime area, but also organized crime has been on the agenda of multilateral work only within the current decade during which UNODC has made five crime instruments -two

Conventions and three Protocols- come into force. The underlying factor is that anti-crime multilateralism is only in its infancy.

On 28 September 2001, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1373, which calls all member states to bring their efforts together against terrorism and transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money-laundering, and illegal arms-trafficking. The resolution is binding in that it obliges all the countries to act against terror financing and support. Nonetheless, as also described by an Interpol analyst (in Cagaptay and Cem), the failure to achieve robust multilateral capabilities in the financial and law-enforcement areas because of lack of political will leaves it beyond optimism to observe meaningful international coordination and cooperation.

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