

RIEAS WORKSHOP

“PKK: FREEDOM FIGHTERS OR TERRORISTS”

13 OCTOBER 2010, ATHENS, GREECE

PKK: ‘terrorists,’ or ‘freedom fighters’?

Dr. DARKO TRIFUNOVIC

**(FACULTY OF SECURITY STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF
BELGRADE AND RIEAS SENIOR ANALYST)**

**Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies
(RIEAS) - (www.rieas.gr)**

Abstract

The Kurdish issue as the autonomist movement of the Kurdish minority in Turkey is widely known, has many facets, one of the most important ones being the existence of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Part), which conducts, over the past generation a continuous guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state along with numerous acts of violence directed mostly against military and police Targets.

In this present paper, an outline of the PKK is going to be provided, along with the stance of the international media, the various international complications that this issue entails for Turkey and a note will be given regarding the “Turkish Hezbollah” group, in order to provide a clear-cut case of a terrorist organization operating in Turkey in contrast with PKK, which has a difficulty of be defined as such.

Lastly, the repercussions of the PKK and the Turkish stance to it will be mentioned, as a remark on the possible future importance of the issue for Turkey’s political stability.

Key words: PKK, Turkey, terrorism, guerrilla, Kosovo

Historical synopsis

Kongra-Gel was founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1974 as a Marxist-Leninist separatist organization and formally named the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in 1978. The group, composed primarily of Turkish Kurds, began in 1984 its campaign of armed violence, which has resulted in some 30,000 casualties¹.

¹ <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/pkk.htm>

The PKK's goal has been to establish an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey, northern Iraq, and parts of Iran and Syria. In the early 1990s, the PKK moved beyond rural-based insurgent activities to include urban terrorism. Turkish authorities captured Ocalan in Kenya in early 1999², and the Turkish State Security Court subsequently sentenced him to death, a sentence later commuted to life imprisonment following the abolition of the death penalty³.

In August 1999, Ocalan announced a "peace initiative," ordering members to refrain from violence and requesting dialogue with Ankara on Kurdish issues⁴. At a PKK Congress in January 2000, members supported Ocalan's initiative and claimed the group now would use only political means to achieve its public goal of improved rights for Kurds in Turkey. In April 2002 at its 8th Party Congress, the PKK changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK)⁵ and proclaimed a commitment to non-violent activities in support of Kurdish rights. In late 2003, the group sought to engineer another political face-lift, renaming itself Kongra-Gel (KGK) and promoting its "peaceful" intentions while continuing to conduct attacks in "self-defense" and to refuse disarmament.

In June 2004, the group's hard-line militant wing, the People's Defense Force (HPG), which had taken control of the group in February 2004, renounced the PKK's self-imposed cease-fire of the past five years.

Since Post-invasion Iraq, 2003–present, according to Turkey, Massoud Barzani, president of South Kurdistan, and US forces have not done enough to combat with the organization and secure the Iraqi-Turkish border, causing tensions between the Iraqi and Turkish governments. In an interview during April 2010 the leader of the armed wing of the PKK, Murat Karayilan, admitted to his organisation having attacked a group of approaching American soldiers in 2004 in North Iraq and killing at least one of them.

International outreach

Although the EU officially designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, the European press is still hesitant to attach the 'terrorist organization' label to the PKK. The organization seems to enjoy support from a variety of international actors from its establishment in the mid-70's and up to date⁶.

² *11 Years Ago: How Israel's Mossad Captured Kurdish Fugitive Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya*, <http://www.afroarticles.com/article-dashboard/Article/11-Years-Ago--How-Israel-s-Mossad-Captured-Kurdish-Fugitive-Abdullah-Ocalan-in-Kenya/202576>

³ *Kongra-Gel (PKK)*, http://www.terrorism101.org/organizations/Kurdistan_Workers_Party.html

⁴ http://www.terrorismfiles.org/organisations/kurdistan_workers_party.html

⁵ *PKK (A.k.a KADEK) Kurdish Worker's Party (A.k.a. Kurdish Freedom and Democracy Congress)* <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/pkk-pr.cfm>

⁶ *EU says 'terrorists,' European press says 'freedom fighters'*, Today's Zaman, 20 October 2007, Saturday, Selcuk Gultasli Brussels, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=125117>

The organization's annual budget has been estimated at \$500 million Euros. The PKK receives its funding in the form of private donations, from both organisations and individuals from around the world. Some of these supporters are Kurdish businessmen in south-eastern Turkey, sympathisers in Syria and Iran, and Europe. Parties and concerts are organized by branch groups.

Additionally, it is believed that the PKK earns money through the sale of various publications, as well as receiving revenues from legitimate businesses owned by the organization. Besides affiliate organizations, there are sympathizer organizations such as the Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (KON-KURD, headquartered in Brussels) and the International Kurdish Businessmen Union (KAR-SAZ, in Rotterdam) which constantly exchanges information and perform legitimate or semi-legitimate commercial activities and donations⁷.

Leaders and support

Murat Karayilan has the control of the organization in practice, although undergone numerous conflicts between Cemil Bayik. Cemil Bayik beside Abdullah Ocalan, Kesire Yildirim Ocalan, and Hakki Karaer was one of the core leaders. Cemil Bayik's military skills and leadership were criticized by Abdullah Ocalan during his 1999 trial. The organization appointed "Doctor Bahoz," the nom de guerre of Fehman Huseyin, a Syrian Kurd, in charge of the movement's military operations signifying the long-standing solidarity among Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan⁸.

In 2007, the organization was believed to have a number of camps strung out through the mountains that straddle the border between Turkey and Iraq, including in Sinaht, Haftanin, Kanimasi and Zap. The organization has two types of camps, the border camps that were used as forward bases from which militants infiltrate into Turkey. The units deployed there are highly mobile and the camps have only the minimum infrastructure. The camps in the Qandil Mountains have a more developed infrastructure—including a field hospital, electricity generators and a large proportion of the PKK's lethal and non-lethal supplies.

There are also training camps in other countries, the organization's training camp which was deep in the woods and indiscernible was dismantled near Eindhoven in the Netherlands. The following raids resulted in arrests and seize of materials in The Hague, Rotterdam, Eindhoven and Capelle an den IJssel. There was another training camp in Belgium, which is evidence the organization uses training camps in Europe for political and ideological training⁹.

European media response

⁷ Britannica Concise Encyclopedia: *Kurdistan Workers' Party*,
<http://www.answers.com/topic/kurdistan-workers-party>;

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Is the Kurdistan Workers party PKK coming to Pittsburgh for the G20?*, By Dave Mayers, 2009,
<http://www.examiner.com/history-in-pittsburgh/is-the-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk-coming-to-pittsburgh-for-the-g20>

The German paper Die Welt did not use the word terrorism when it spoke about the “PKK guerrillas,” “Kurdish freedom fighters” and “Kurdish extremists.” In the story it ran about the incident, the paper -- which is inclined toward the right and is published by Axel Springer, the biggest media group in Germany -- it was claimed that Turkey acted with in accordance with a double standard in bringing Aysel Tuğluk, a Democratic Society Party (DTP) deputy, to court on charges of separatism despite her parliamentary immunity.

Another conservative German paper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, described the PKK as an “outlawed Kurdish party” and the PKK terrorists as “guerrillas” in its story about the recent terrorist attacks. Left-wing Süddeutsche Zeitung used the phrases “Kurdish workers’ party PKK” and “Kurdish extremists,” Neue Züricher Zeitung while the respectable Swiss daily opted for using the phrase “Kurdistan’s outlawed workers’ party.” The semi-official German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) explains that they do not use the word “terrorism” in attacks against soldiers while they do so in attacks against civilians -- but this is not true in practice¹⁰.

Terrorist or Guerrilla fighter? (Definitions)

- The difference between a “terrorist” and “guerrilla fighter” is not whose side you are on¹¹.

- To be a terrorist requires specifically targeting civilians.

-Guerrilla warfare deliberately targets military personnel and installations, in pursuit of both military and political objectives.

-Terrorism, on the other hand, deliberately targets civilians and civilian installations, to pursue primarily political objectives¹².

All definitions of terrorism have to address the differences between terrorism and other forms of violence, notably between terrorism and guerrilla warfare (including a war of liberation from an occupying force) and common criminal violence. However, addressing the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter, between terrorism and insurgency, lead away from legal theory and into the political realm. Debates at the United Nations attempting to define terrorism ended in failure as a rule, as different countries had different perceptions and understanding, not only concerning the definitions on offer but relating to the examples mentioned as possible models.

During the 56th session of the UN General Assembly, after September 11, 2001, the principal debate concerning the definition of terrorism took place in the 6th Committee (legal).

¹⁰ *EU says ‘terrorists,’ European press says ‘freedom fighters’*, Today’s Zaman, 20 October 2007, Saturday, Selcuk Gultasli Brussels, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=125117>

¹¹ *Terrorist or Guerilla Fighter?* <http://tinyfrog.wordpress.com/2007/07/10/terrorist-or-guerilla-fighter>

¹² *Defining Terrorism - Is One Man’s Terrorist Another Man’s Freedom Fighter?* Boaz Ganor, <http://www.ict.org.il/ResearchPublications/tabid/64/Articlsid/432/currentpage/1/Default.aspx>

The first serious attempt was the proposal of experts from Switzerland and the Serb Republic within Bosnia-Herzegovina to approach the issue of a general definition of terrorism in the same manner used for other criminal acts under domestic or international law. The proposed principle of defining terrorism focused on the victim, as customary with other criminal acts, instead of the perpetrator (i.e. whether he is a terrorist or a freedom fighter).

Turkish Hezbollah: A terrorist organization

Turkish Hezbollah is a Kurdish Islamic (Sunni) extremist organization that arose in the late 1980s in response to Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) atrocities against Muslims in south-eastern Turkey, where (Turkish) Hezbollah seeks to establish an independent Islamic state.

Turkish Hezbollah expanded its target base and modus operandi from killing PKK militants to conducting low-level bombings against liquor stores, bordellos, and other establishments that the organization considered "anti-Islamic." In January 2000, Turkish security forces killed Huseyin Velioglu, the leader of (Turkish) Hezbollah, in a shootout at a safe house in Istanbul. The incident sparked a yearlong series of counterterrorist operations against the group that resulted in the detention of some 2,000 individuals; authorities arrested several hundred of those on criminal charges.

At the same time, police recovered nearly 70 bodies of Turkish and Kurdish businessmen and journalists that (Turkish) Hezbollah had tortured and brutally murdered during the mid-to-late 1990s. The group began targeting official Turkish interests in January 2001, when its operatives assassinated the Diyarbakir police chief in the group's most sophisticated operation to date. Turkish Hezbollah did not conduct a major operation in 2002¹³.

Possible shift in Turkish policy?

Turkey has decided to recognize Kosovo as an independent state; Foreign Minister Ali Babacan said on Monday, a day after the breakaway majority Albanian province declared its independence from Serbia. (18th of February 2008)¹⁴

Is it Turkey ready to make first step?

Is it possible that Turkey has already made first step in order to recognize new Kurdish State Kurdistan?

Just to better understand following Babacan statement: "Turkey believes that the rule of law and the universal values of human rights, democracy and pluralism should be promoted in Kosovo,"

¹³ *Turkish Hizballah*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/hizballah-t.htm>

¹⁴ *Turkey to recognize Kosovo independence: Foreign Minister*, By Evren Mesci, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSANK00036720080218>

For the time being a contradictory policy is being followed if one takes into account Turkey's stance towards Kosovo's independence proclamation and its own secessionist movement in the Eastern parts of the country.

Turkey is a large country situated in a sensitive geostrategic cross road between the West and the East. The various issues that are culminated including most importantly the PKK and the Kurdish issue will have most certainly both domestic and international consequences and will remake Turkey's political landscape in the coming years, bearing in mind the overall volatile situation in the wider Middle East.

Conclusion

The existence of PKK, poses a great challenge for the Turkish authorities both as a major domestic issue and as an international complication due to the internalization of the Kurdish issue. Moreover the existence of other organizations of terrorist nature, as the example of the Turkish Hezbollah, poses serious questions, as to whether political and social stability could ever be achieved in Turkey and especially in the Eastern parts of the country.

By concluding it must be noted, that the Kurdish issue is inexorably related to the accession process of Ankara to the EU and at the same time it directly affects the triangular relation between Turkey-Iran-Iraq that all have large and restless Kurdish minorities. Therefore should the guerrilla warfare is not resolved in the near future, that will stall Turkey's entrance in the EU and at the same time oblige the country to keep a delicate balance of powers with countries such as Iran that are currently on target by the international community. In essence PKK's existence is very much important for Turkey's international posture and may well prove to be a factor of historical importance regarding to which direction the country will follow in the future. To the West or to the East?