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Divergent European Approaches to Combating PKK Terrorism

By Abdulkadir Onay
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Earlier this month, Europol -- the European Union law enforcement agency that handles criminal intelligence -- released its annual *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, part of which addresses the European criminal activities of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The release comes on the heels of a March 29 German report outlining considerable details about PKK activities in Germany. Although these reports help illustrate the extent of the group's European infrastructure, many European governments have still not taken serious steps to counter the threat, despite the PKK's presence on the EU's terrorism list.

PKK Activities in Europe

Both reports demonstrate that the PKK operates widely in Europe, at the operational, financial, and political levels. Regarding terrorist activity, the EU report states that fourteen of Germany's fifteen terrorist attacks last year were perpetrated by the PKK. Most of these attacks involved arson aimed at Turkish interests such as travel agencies, banks, and mosques. This level of PKK activity is hardly surprising, given that the German report puts the country's PKK presence at 11,500 members. Moreover, the EU report indicates that thirty-eight PKK members were arrested for attack-related offenses in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovakia last year.

In the logistical, financial, and political arenas, the German report asserts that the PKK coordinates various European operations through the Kurdish Democratic Coordination (CDK). The CDK operates a wide range of PKK fronts, including the Union of Association of Kurdish Employers (KARSAZ), headquartered in Frankfurt, Germany; the Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (KON-KURD), headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, with sub-branches in most European countries; and the Kurdish National Congress (KUK), founded in the Netherlands but presently operating in Belgium.

KUK seeks to influence European decisionmakers and institutions, especially those in Brussels, in order to legitimize the PKK's activities. KON-KURD organizes European Kurds into associations, foundations, and unions aimed at bringing PKK interests to the international agenda. KARSAZ manages the finances collected from the group's legal and illegal activities in Europe, including donations from more than 400 member businessmen.

The German report also noted several media outlets that operate freely across Europe as PKK mouthpieces: Firat News Agency in the Netherlands; ROJ-Group and Denge Mezopotamya radio in Belgium; Roj TV and MMC TV in Denmark; Newroz TV in Norway; and Yeni Ozgur Politika newspaper in Germany.

European Reluctance

Like the United States and Turkey, the EU has designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. In accordance with this designation, EU member states are required to take action against the organization; this includes extraditing criminals, freezing assets and transactions, and cooperating with other countries.

Despite these requirements, some European countries have been reluctant to target the PKK. In Denmark, for example, the Roj TV network has been given full broadcast rights. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Manouchehr Tahsili Zonoozi, the Iranian Kurd who manages the station, acknowledges that Roj "maintains contact with the PKK" (though he maintains that it "is not controlled by the PKK").

Similarly, France has been less than consistent in addressing the PKK threat. In February 2007, for example, Paris police arrested fourteen group members on charges of money laundering with the aim of financing terrorism. Yet, authorities later released twelve of the suspects under conditional discharge (meaning that they would not be sentenced for their first offense unless they committed a further offense within a stated period). Two of these suspects -- Riza Altun, chief organizer of the PKK's European activities, and Nedim Seven, a key PKK financier -- were released despite being wanted under Interpol red bulletins.

Seven was also involved in a case that highlighted the Netherlands' problematic policy toward the group. Dutch authorities detained the financier in August 2006 -- together with the earlier November 2004 crackdown on a PKK training camp in Boxtel, the arrest created hope of permanent and widespread Dutch cooperation against the group. However, Dutch authorities released Seven two months later, declining an extradition request by Turkish authorities.

Elsewhere, Austrian authorities arrested Riza Altun in July 2007 but later set him free and helped arrange his flight to Iraq, despite Turkish protests. And in November, Remzi Kartal, the PKK's deputy political head, was permitted to enter Austria for a meeting in Linz.

Other countries have also hosted or granted free passage to PKK political leaders, including Zubeyir Aydar in Switzerland (which, it should be mentioned is not an EU member) and Hacı Ahmedi in Germany. Aydar and Ahmedi are the principal leaders of the PKK and the Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), respectively, reporting to Murat Karayilan and Biryar Gabari in the groups' Iraqi enclave. (For more on PJAK, see [PolicyWatch no. 1244](#))

European Crackdowns

Several European countries, particularly Germany, have been more aggressive in cracking down on the PKK. For instance, in a January 2007 operation targeting the group's financial activities, German police detained twenty-three people and seized documents, computers, and bank receipts. Although Sakine Cansiz, a high-level member arrested in Hamburg in March 2007, was released after one month's detention, Germany extradited two other members to Turkey later that year. Also in 2007, Germany sentenced a PKK terrorist to two years and nine months in prison for heading the group's activities in Bavaria from 1994 to 1995. Finally, Ayfer Kaya (a.k.a. Roserin), a leading terrorist and purported girlfriend of PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested by German authorities upon entering the country from Austria last month.

Britain has also shown willingness to crack down on the organization. In February 2008, Selman Bozkur, a leading PKK terrorist who had reportedly entered the United Kingdom in January 2008, was detained and deported. Despite this and other encouraging actions, however, British authorities have not been willing to extradite suspects such as Bozkur directly into Turkish custody.

In Belgium, a court fined Roj TV four million Euros for tax evasion as an outcome of a 1996 suit filed against Med-TV, an earlier PKK front station and Roj forebear. In that suit, Med-TV -- which was eventually closed by British court order in April 1999 for inciting crime and disorder -- was charged with money laundering, human smuggling, extortion, blackmail, counterfeiting, and drug smuggling. Finally, Italian authorities arrested Nedim Seven in Rome last month, where he awaits trial. Due to the red bulletin issued on his real name, Seven had been traveling under a forged passport with a fake name.

A Test for Europe

Recent European cooperation with Turkey against the PKK is encouraging and should be applauded. However, there is much more that individual countries can do in terms of concrete action against the group, particularly for those countries that have not yet taken any such action. Willingness to combat the PKK should serve as a litmus test for these countries' commitment to both the war on terror and their responsibilities under NATO -- another international body that has labeled the PKK a terrorist group. Indeed, Turkey is increasingly judging its European allies by their enthusiasm in taking action against the PKK presence in their territory.

Lt. Col. Abdulkadir Onay (Turkish Army) is a visiting military fellow in The Washington Institute's [Turkish Research Program](#).

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