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Contending with the PKK's Narco-Terrorism

By Benjamin Freedman and [Matthew Levitt](#)

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On December 8, the United Nations Security Council will host its first-ever thematic debate on drug trafficking as a threat to international security. This focus is notable. U.S. officials are increasingly concerned with the evolving threat of drug trafficking, especially as terrorist organizations stake a bigger claim in this illegal arena. In fact, on November 18, FBI director Robert Mueller met with senior Turkish officials to address U.S.-Turkish efforts targeting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), also known as Kongra-Gel. A press release from the U.S. embassy in Ankara following the meeting stressed that U.S. officials "strongly support Turkey's efforts against the PKK terrorist organization" and highlighted the two countries' long history of working together in the fight against terrorism and transnational organized crime.

These discussions are timely. Despite Ankara's recent bid to alleviate the Kurdish issue -- a bid referred to as the "democratic opening" -- the PKK is one of a growing number of terrorist organizations with significant stakes in the international drug trade. In fact, in October the U.S. Treasury Department added three PKK/Kongra-Gel senior leaders to its list of foreign narcotics traffickers. The PKK, along with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), is one of only a few organizations worldwide designated by the U.S. government as both a terrorist organization and a significant foreign narcotics trafficker.

Background

"Kongra-Gel" is the latest in a long series of names for the PKK. Established in 1974 as a Kurdish Marxist-Leninist group by Abdullah Ocalan (currently serving a life sentence), the organization's use of violence has vacillated over time. Initially, the PKK sought the establishment of an independent Marxist-Leninist Kurdish state, though more recently it claims to focus on securing a binational Turkish-Kurdish state. While the PKK's use of violence has subsided, it still maintains an active armed wing -- and it was this wing that, after seizing control of the group in 2004, annulled the PKK's five-year-long cessation of hostilities, declared by Ocalan in 1999 following his arrest.

The State Department listed the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997 based on its continuous use of violence during the 1990s, including the targeting of Turkish diplomatic and commercial facilities in Western Europe in the mid-1990s, as well as tourist sites within Turkey earlier in the decade. In 2001, the Treasury Department listed the PKK as a specially designated global terrorist entity and added Kongra-Gel, the group's new name, in December of that year.

To secure funding, the PKK has long engaged in criminal activities such as trafficking of counterfeit money, illegal foreign currency exchanges, smuggling, tax evasion, and drug dealing. As a result of the PKK's increasing activity in the international narcotics trade, the Treasury Department designated the group a significant foreign narcotics trafficker in May 2008. Even more recently, in February 2009, the Treasury Department also listed the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), which is under the control of the Kongra-Gel, as a specially designated global terrorist entity. Despite PKK and PJAK insistence that the two groups function independent of each other, the Treasury Department noted that PJAK was established by Kongra-Gel leaders in 2004 expressly to expand the group's appeal to Iranian Kurds. Treasury reported further that, as of

April 2008, Kongra-Gel still selected and appointed PJAK's senior leadership, as well as its forty-person central committee.

PKK/Kongra-Gel Terrorism

In the early 1990s, the PKK embraced urban terrorism as a tactic in the pursuit of its nationalist aims, in addition to its oft-employed rural insurgency operations. The group carried out countless attacks throughout the decade, killing an estimated 30,000 people in southeastern Anatolia in particular. According to the State Department, Kongra-Gel is also responsible for scores of attacks since the end of the ceasefire in 2004. An August 2006 State Department release marking the twenty-second anniversary of PKK/Kongra-Gel violence noted the deaths of more than 500 victims of Kongra-Gel attacks through the first eight months of that year.

The group's violent activities have not been limited to Turkey and its neighboring countries. The European Union's 2008 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report revealed that of the fifteen terrorist attacks carried out in Germany in 2007, fourteen were connected to Kongra-Gel. According to the EU's 2009 terrorism report, all five arson attempts reported in Austria in 2008 were attributed to Kongra-Gel. And, illustrating the scope of the organization's European reach, the 2009 report cites the arrests of Kongra-Gel leaders and operatives in Germany, Italy, and Slovakia for terrorism-related offenses, as well as for transporting cash on behalf of the group. In October 2009, French authorities detained nine Kongra-Gel members on racketeering charges. This effort brings the total number of Kongra-Gel members arrested in France since June 2008 to forty.

PKK/Kongra-Gel Narcotics Trafficking

As the Treasury Department's October designation of three Kongra-Gel leaders explains, "The drug trade is one of Kongra-Gel's most lucrative criminal activities." After securing unprocessed morphine from the Golden Crescent region spanning Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, Kongra-Gel then creates heroin in its laboratories in Turkey for sale throughout Europe. The taxation of drug transfers across territory it controls, as well as payments from traffickers and smugglers at its borders, serves as a crucial income source for the group. The October 27 arrest of three Kongra-Gel operatives by Greek-Cypriot authorities further illustrates the organization's participation in the global drug trade. The son of Kongra-Gel's Cypriot leader was detained on the island of Cyprus, along with two other Kongra-Gel members, after an extended police chase. A search of the suspects' car turned up ten kilograms of heroin, an infantry rifle, and important Kongra-Gel documents, among other crime-related items. Immediately following the arrest, the leader of the organization on Cyprus fled to Greece, reportedly carrying \$225,000 in Kongra-Gel funds.

The recent U.S. designations underscore that Kongra-Gel operates as more of a hybrid terrorist and drug-trafficking cartel than a conventional terrorist organization. The Drug Enforcement Administration's former chief of operations Michael Braun has called these types of operations "the face of twenty-first century organized crime -- and they are meaner and uglier than anything law enforcement or militaries have ever faced. They represent the most significant security challenge facing governments around the world." The recent arrest and seizure on Cyprus -- for activity more representative of a criminal drug syndicate than a nationalist resistance organization -- reflect Kongra-Gel's multifaceted character.

PKK/Kongra-Gel activity in the international drug trade, however, is hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, in 2007 and 2008 Turkish authorities confiscated narcotics shipments and drug labs owned or operated by the PKK/Kongra-Gel. In 2005, 80 percent of the European drug market reportedly came from the PKK-controlled Turkish narcotics sector. Interpol data reveal that the PKK also managed 80 percent of the European drug market in 1992 and, in 1994, between 60 and 70 percent. The PKK has reportedly financed its Kurdish nationalist aspirations through the illegal drug trade since as early as the 1980s, participating in every stage of the supply chain from processing to marketing.

Conclusion

Recent attempts to limit Kongra-Gel's capabilities have met with some success. In August, twenty-six members of PJAK, the affiliated group in Iran, were killed in a targeted maneuver by Iranian authorities in the northwest part of the country. In another instance, a Turkish military spokesman reported in June that nearly 375 PKK/Kongra-Gel members had been killed or injured in gun battles with Turkish forces in northern Iraq since last October. Meanwhile, the fighting continues: ten Turkish soldiers were killed in three southeastern provinces in early September, and five Kongra-Gel operatives were killed on October 26 in the eastern province of Bingol.

In the face of battlefield losses, U.S. terrorism and narcotics designations, and the decline in violence targeting civilians, the Turkish government initiated an amnesty program for PKK/Kongra-Gel operatives. By allowing PKK/Kongra-Gel members to return to Turkey, in concert with the implementation of proposed reforms extending rights to Kurds, the Turkish government hoped to undermine Kongra-Gel and further weaken the twenty-five-year Kurdish insurgency. To date, however, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's "democratic opening" has produced only limited results. On October 19, eight PKK/Kongra-Gel-affiliated Kurdish rebels crossed into Turkey from Iraq and turned themselves in to Turkish authorities under the amnesty program. A group of Europe-based PKK/Kongra-Gel operatives had planned to follow suit, but the amnesty program was halted in response to PKK victory celebrations for the earlier pardons. As a result of the ensuing public relations fallout, the amnesty program remains frozen.

Contending with the PKK/Kongra-Gel's illicit transnational activities, which cover the spectrum of terrorism and narcotics trafficking, requires increased international cooperation of the kind represented by FBI director Mueller's recent meetings in Turkey. Furthermore, given the group's central role in narcotics trafficking in Europe, formalizing U.S.-EU-Turkish efforts to deal with Kongra-Gel is in the interest of all concerned parties. The Security Council's upcoming debate offers a good start for such efforts.

Benjamin Freedman is a research intern in the [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](#) at The Washington Institute. Dr. Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at the Institute and director of the Stein Program.

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