

Interpreting the PKK's Signals in Europe

By Vera Eccarius-Kelly

Since the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) unexpectedly abducted three German hikers near Mt. Ararat in Turkey on 8 July 2008, and then released them on 20 July, intelligence sources in Europe have intensified their surveillance of PKK operatives among members of the particularly numerous Kurdish Diaspora in Germany.[1] According to German newspaper reports, the PKK demanded that in exchange for the release of the hikers "Berlin stop its hostile politics towards the Kurds and the PKK in Germany".[2] While the exact purpose of the abduction requires further analysis, it is clear that it was the armed branch of the PKK, known as the People's Defense Forces (HPG), that kidnapped the German hikers at their Mt. Ararat encampment at 10,500 feet in the evening hours—only to release them unharmed some two weeks later.[3]

Questions Related to an Abduction

Several questions preoccupy security analysts in relation to this abduction. How should this event be interpreted in Europe, and particularly in Germany? What signals did the PKK send? And, most importantly, is the PKK entering a renewed phase of high intensity activism and terrorism in Europe?

This essay aims to provide a brief analysis of the often confusing and contradictory messages sent by European Kurdish circles.[4] Despite convoluted interpretations of Kurdish demands that are linked to a lack of unity among the many Kurdish organizations in Europe, it is possible to disentangle the underlying messages. Part of the difficulty of interpreting signals sent by Kurdish organizations and the PKK relates to contradictory policies enacted by individual European Union member states in relation to the Kurdish question, as well as occasional Turkish meddling and disinformation campaigns. This essay rejects the interpretation that the PKK initiated a new European terror strategy that parallels the growing violence in Turkey.

Mixed Messages: A Dual-Strategy

German intelligence sources have long suggested that the PKK, also known as Kongra-Gel (KGK), pursues a dual strategy to remain relevant in the European context. Since the capture of its leader, Öcalan, in 1999, the terrorist group's European activities predominantly ranged from acts of civil disobedience, the dissemination of nationalist propaganda, and demonstrations and solidarity marches, to cultural events including festivals and public education campaigns. But the PKK is also a criminal enterprise involved with drug trafficking, human smuggling, and extortion schemes to finance its operations.[5] Throughout the past decade, the aim of the PKK has been to stay in the headlines and reinforce continually a sense of commitment among Diaspora groups to the cause of Kurdish nationalism.

In Turkey, however, the armed branch of the PKK, the HPG, has long engaged in a guerrilla strategy that includes brutal terror campaigns. Their ultimate goal remains the formation of an autonomous region for Kurds in the southeastern provinces of the country. At times it appears that an official Turkish recognition of a separate Kurdish ethnic identity would suffice to advance peace negotiations. But then, positions shift and nothing short of the formation of an independent nation of Kurdistan would seem to appease the group. To grasp fully the many underlying currents that make up the PKK in its entirety remains a daunting challenge for security analysts.

Since the spring of 2006 the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Turkey have experienced growing unrest and heightened levels of violence. The PKK initiated and organized a series of demonstrations in the city of Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of the Kurdish region. The demonstrations quickly escalated when government forces utilized excessive force to intimidate and disperse the growing number of protesters. A dozen or more Kurds died in street battles with hundreds injured and detained. The violence culminated in a series of bombings that targeted government agencies and its representatives in the region. The so-called Freedom Falcons of Kurdistan (TAK) carried out the bombing campaigns and, according to Turkish intelligence, the group is closely affiliated with the PKK and represents its most militant units.[6]

TAK is accused in the timed urban bombings of 28 July 2008, in an Istanbul neighborhood that killed 17 civilians and injured scores. While it is not entirely clear who carried out the bombings, it is possible that ultra-nationalists linked to the secular establishment or Kurdish militants could have carried out the attacks. The PKK has denied any involvement, although the Turkish government stated that it has identified the PKK as the perpetrator of the bombings.[7] If convincing evidence emerges that TAK carried out the bombings without any relationship to the ultra-nationalist terror group Ergenekon, this would have to be interpreted as a strategic intensification of terrorism since a neighborhood was targeted to maximize Turkish civilian casualties.

Symbolic Messaging

When initial information about the hikers' abduction reached German intelligence circles (BND) and the Federal Criminal Police (BKA), security experts established a communications center to collaborate with Turkish officials in an effort to free the men. The BKA utilized longstanding contacts with PKK operatives in the city of Cologne to initiate negotiations. A combination of factors led to the eventual release of the hikers, namely the direct channel of communication with the PKK in Europe, and the Turkish military's effective encircling of the militants near the Iranian border. Based on media interviews given by one of the released hikers, Helmut Hainzmeier, the group of PKK militants shifted in size and tended to march during the night hours to avoid detection by the Turkish military.[8] When the group marched toward the Iranian border region, however, Turkish troops had cut off that escape route, forcing the terrorists to release the hikers. Although several German media interviews with Chancellor Merkel suggested that a payment had been made to the PKK, it is unclear if a ransom payment sped up the release of the three men.[9]

The attempt of the PKK unit to cross into Iran confirms a heightened level of collaboration between the PKK and PJAK, an Iranian-based Kurdish terrorist group that also utilizes northern Iraq for safe haven. The Turkish military has long complained that US forces benefited from militant Kurdish logistical collaboration in northern Iraq, and, that in exchange for information, the US ignored PKK and PJAK units that were deeply ensconced along the Iraqi-Turkish border.[10] The US military rejects the notion that it has ignored or even supported Kurdish militants affiliated with the PKK or PJAK. While regular Turkish incursions, and in particular Turkish air force bombing raids, have weakened the PKK in its northern Iraqi hideouts in the Kandil Mountains, neither of the terror organizations is near military defeat.

Far from the Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian territory where PKK guerrilla units operate, the European PKK pursues a strategy that emphasizes strengthening its position by engaging in an aggressive propaganda campaign involving limited violence (i.e. the PKK avoids targeting Europeans and their property). The most obvious area of contestation between Turkish and Kurdish interests in Europe is over the control of media messages to the Kurdish Diaspora. For over a decade, the Turkish state has aimed to curtail the dissemination of ideologically framed interpretations of Kurdish nationhood in the media. For example, the Turkish government requested in the past several years that Denmark's government withdraw its media license from Roj-TV station—a Kurdish-language station that also broadcasts into Turkey and irritates the Turkish government. In the past, Ankara had successfully pursued the closures of Medya-TV in France in 2004 and Med-TV in the UK in 1999.[11]

But the Danish government rejected Turkey's attempts to limit the freedom of expression of Kurdish opposition groups in Denmark. When some 56 mayors linked to the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) faced persecution in Turkey for having sent a signed letter to the Danish government, Danish officials reacted with anger. From a Danish perspective, expressing a desire to keep Roj-TV on the air did not represent terrorist activities. Officials in Denmark considered it unacceptable that Turkish state authorities accused the leadership of the DTP of "knowingly and willingly supporting the PKK" by asking that a TV station retain its license.[12]

Media outlets such as Roj-TV, Medya-TV, and Med-TV are inherently controversial and operate as long as they retain a license in Europe. This is also the case for Kurdish web portals on the Internet that circumvent government controls or are listed on security reports such as Firat News Agency in the Netherlands and the now defunct Kurdistan Rundbrief in Germany. Based on statements posted on Kurdish Web sites, the closure of German Roj-TV emerged as the most likely reason for the abduction of the German hikers in Turkey.[13] In May the German government raided the locally registered Roj-TV affiliate Viko Fernseh Produktion (part of the now illegal Mesopotamia Broadcasting Corporation) in the city of Wuppertal (located in North Rhine-Westphalia, the German state with the largest Kurdish communities). Having lost one of its most effective propaganda tools in Germany, the PKK leadership seemed compelled to respond.

The PKK pursued several goals with the abduction and later release of the hikers. It sent the message to the German public as well as Diaspora communities that the organization continues to have the ability to act forcefully, and that it remains relevant in relation to the Kurdish question. The abduction of the hikers, however, should not be perceived as the initial stage of a new and hardened campaign in Europe. The PKK may continue to engage in future abductions of Europeans and in bombing campaigns in Turkey to demonstrate strength. An insecure German public will avoid Turkish vacation locations causing financial harm to popular resort towns and hiking destinations. But the PKK will not endanger its European fundraising and propaganda options by committing abductions of Europeans in Europe. The PKK needs to avoid extensive entanglements with police and security agencies within Europe.

Hydra-Headed Kurdish Organizations

The heightened sense of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and its politicized offspring in Europe have failed to establish Kurdish ideological unity on a broader scale. Kurds in Europe have not articulated a common political agenda and Kurdish civil society actors appear unable or unwilling to agree on publicly identifiable positions or a representative voice. Interestingly, this development parallels the PKK's inability to replace Öcalan as its leader after his arrest in 1999. The absence of clear and unifying leadership among Kurdish organizations in Europe appears to have weakened the ability of Kurds to gain support among mainstream political circles. In Germany, only the far left-wing party Die Linke expressed disagreement with the closure of and ban on Roj-TV in Wuppertal.[14]

Several pragmatic reasons explain why a sense of unity within the Kurdish Diaspora may not be a realistic expectation at this time. Essentially, the Kurdish Diaspora operates as an unauthorized challenger community that gains little from seeking authorization by governments in Europe. Kurdish nationalist mobilization is most effective in opposition to state control rather than in collaboration with authorities—even in a de-territorialized setting as in Europe. In addition, many Kurdish civil society organizations continue to exchange information with banned PKK groups in Europe or its affiliated organizations.

This reality forces Kurds to operate in a political space full of friction, often standing accused of collaboration with terrorist groups. The lack of a unified Kurdish position makes the Diaspora appear confused and disjointed to the outside world. Without a doubt, there is ongoing internal discord among Kurdish groups yet this dysfunction also may serve them well. Internal dissension and the lack of a clearly articulated and shared nationalist vision can actually provide a form of protection for the PKK, since this makes it more difficult for European states to assign accountability and take action against various and sometimes transient PKK decision-makers. In addition, the lack of unity within European Kurdish civil society circles prevents the PKK from taking definitive control of all Kurdish organizations in Europe.

Failures in Turkish and European Policy Circles

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has failed to develop and implement a new path toward resolving the Kurdish question despite its strong showing in the 2007 parliamentary elections. Counter-terrorism efforts rather than dialogue with Kurdish civil society representatives dominate the political agenda. Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) representatives continue to be classified automatically as spokespersons for the PKK to justify the lack of political dialogue in the country. In part, this reflects the intense pressure on the AKP by the secular establishment including the military to close down the AKP for perceived weakening of the foundations of the Turkish Republic. Turkey's chief prosecutor had filed a case with the constitutional court in March, arguing that the AKP should be disbanded, and that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan be banned along with 70 other party members for at least five years.[15]

While the constitutional court narrowly rejected the AKP ban (6 judges of the required 7 supported a ban) the Kurdish question will be even more difficult to address in the aftermath of ongoing legal wrangling. Turkey's image in Europe remains tarnished, but many public officials welcomed the court's decision. Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt reportedly stated that "an attempt to stage a thinly disguised legal coup" against the Turkish government had failed.[16] With the AKP weakened and the intensification of terrorist campaigns in the country, the potential for a Turkish governmental effort to address the Kurdish situation is minimal. There continues

to be speculation, however, that the ultra-nationalist group Ergenekon carried out the timed bombings in Istanbul in July to destroy any chance of public support for addressing the Kurdish question and to undermine the AKP.[17] Recent state investigations into Ergenekon indicate that many assassinations and bombings appear to have been so-called “inside jobs,” i.e. carried out by people affiliated with the ultra-nationalist wing of the military, rather than by Islamist or Kurdish militants as reported in the past.[18] Daily revelations about conspiracies linked to Ergenekon dominate Turkish public discourse.

Europe has also failed to contribute to an effective process that would be necessary to resolve the Kurdish question. An effort to invest in major infrastructure projects such as the controversial South-Eastern Anatolia Dam Project (GAP) will not address either immediate irrigation or energy needs, nor provide badly needed employment for local populations.[19] But most of all, Europe has failed to step up to a leadership position. Hiding behind the EU accession process, the message to the Turkish government has been to improve minority rights. At the same time, Europe sends mixed messages with regard to fighting terrorism. Denmark permits Roj TV and Mesopotamia Broadcasting, but Germany now closed down its affiliates. The European message to the Turkish government and the PKK at this point is not coherent. The Kurdish question and Europe’s response must be clarified so that specific policy steps can be implemented.

Conclusions

The PKK identified years ago that parts of Europe provide useful geographic space where operatives can retreat when the situation in Turkey becomes untenable. Turkey has rightly complained about this. It is a gross exaggeration, however, to suggest that the abduction of the German hikers should be interpreted as an intensification of the PKK’s European campaign. Rather, the PKK leadership felt that it needed to demonstrate relevancy and strength in the face of Germany’s clamp down on Roj-TV in Wuppertal. It will be most telling to observe European-based Kurdish civil society organizations to identify if the PKK gains or loses sympathizers in this effort to assert strength.

Should the AKP government manage to unveil disturbing facts and details regarding Ergenekon’s operations in Turkey over the coming months, new opportunities could emerge for an effective approach to address the Kurdish question. But it is far too early to develop reliable predictions at this point. If past efforts to undermine criminal and terrorist networks are any indication of what is to come, then the situation will remain bleak. The Turkish track record does not inspire confidence.

Vera Eccarius-Kelly is Associate Professor of Political Science at Siena College, NY, and specializes in comparative revolutionary movements in the Middle East and Latin America.

NOTES:

[1]The total number of Kurds residing in Europe is estimated to be around 1 million; nearly 85% of the Kurdish Diaspora in continental Europe comes from Turkey, while Kurds from Iraq form a large part of Kurdish communities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The numbers of Iraqi Kurds in Europe has increased since 2003 because of the ongoing war. Also hidden in general figures related to Kurds is the fact that as many as two-thirds of all Turkish-origin Kurds in Europe live in Germany, and estimates range from 500,000 to 700,000 Kurds in the country. Birgit Ammann, *Kurden in Europa, Ethnizität und Diaspora* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2001), 138.

[2]<http://www.haz.de/newsroom/politik/zentral/politik/ausland/art666,642122>

[3] For an interview with one of the abducted hikers, see Stern Magazin on line in German at <http://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/:Ex-PKK-Geisel-Hainzlmeier-Den-Ararat/631858.html>

[4]The author utilizes a range of open sources to develop theories related to the PKK’s intentions which include conversations with German and Turkish academics, researchers in Europe, PKK affiliated websites, German media reports, and publicly available security reports.

[5]Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2006, p. 278-281.

[6]See Burak Bekdil’s article in Terrorism Focus for further information about TAK at <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373916>

[7]The head of Germany’s intelligence service or Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) expressed public doubt that the bombing campaign in Istanbul was carried out by the PKK. See <http://www.zeit.de/news/artikel/2008/08/03/2585499.xml>

[8]<http://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/:Ex-PKK-Geisel-Hainzlmeier-Den-Ararat/631858.html>

- [9]<http://www.rp-online.de/public/article/politik/ausland/592549/Floss-Loesegeld-an-die-Entfuhrer.html>
- [10]Graham Fuller is quoted in Today's Zaman as stating that the US supported the PKK affiliated terror group PJAK and its incursions into Iran. <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=125112>
- [11]See James Brandon's article in Terrorism Monitor for further details on Roj TV and the PKK in Europe at <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370294>
- [12]For further information on this case, see Amnesty International Annual Report 2007 at <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/Regions/Europe-and-Central-Asia/Turkey>
- [13]http://www.kurdnas.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=944&Itemid=71
See also German newspaper commentaries at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3481190,00.html?maca=en-AI-2414-html-box>
- [14]http://www.dielinke-nrw.de/1103.html?&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=7249&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=1103
http://www.szon.de/news/politik/aktuell/200807100983.html?_from=rss
<http://www.derwesten.de/nachrichten/nachrichten/2008/7/9/news-61367346/detail.html>
- [15]For further details, see Soner Cagaptay et al. at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2731>
- [16] For EU related comments on the Turkish constitutional case, see Elitsa Vucheva's article at http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/aug2008/gb2008081_421263.htm?campaign_id=rss_eu
- [17]Turkish Daily News reported on August 4 that the PKK was responsible for the attack, yet also makes mention of Ergenekon and speculations related to the bombings. See details at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=111549>
- [18]In Today's Zaman the terrorist group Ergenekon is described as a "deep state" paramilitary organization that has manipulated Turkish policies and public opinion for a long time. For full details, see <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=132507>
- [19]Taspinar, Omer (2005), *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey* (New York