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The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity
\(TRISA\)](#)

Complex Operational Environment and
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community about the history and characteristics of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey.
- To provide information on the connection between the PKK's role in the current Syrian uprising, and the Turkish government's response.
- To identify the potential threats posed by the PKK.

Executive Summary

- The goal of the PKK is to establish an independent Kurdish state within the present boundaries of Turkey.
- Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) employed by the PPK include kidnappings, hijackings, suicide bombings, and tactical operations against the Turkish army and security forces.
- Turkey regards the PKK as a direct threat to its national security, and regards PKK provocations staged from Syrian territory as an indicator of PKK influence in that country.
- Although serving a life term for treason since 1999, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, still exerts a strong influence on its policies and tactics.
- The PKK is a major player in the international drug trade. The organization uses profits garnered from this trade to fund its terrorist activities and infrastructure in Turkey and the neighboring countries of Iraq, Iran, and Syria.
- There is a definite correlation between a spike in PKK-related violence in 2012 and the recent breakdown of a diplomatic agreement involving Iraq, Syria, and Iran, who formerly agreed to forbear supporting PKK actions directed against Turkey.

Cover photo: [PKK soldiers in formation](#), graphic used in compliance with Wikimedia guidelines



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Map



CIA map of Kurdish-occupied areas of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, 1992



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Introduction

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a **radical separatist group** that has waged an on-again, off-again guerrilla war to undermine Turkish sovereignty since the late 1970s. It originated in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, which was then under Syrian occupation. From the PKK's inception in 1978 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Soviets as well as Syria's Ba'athist regimes used the organization as a pawn in a long-running proxy war against Turkey. After the Cold War, the governments of Hafez al-Assad and his son, Bashar al-Assad, continued to shelter PKK militants in order to increase their leverage in negotiations with Turkey that centered on possession of the Hatay province (located in Turkey but claimed by Syria), and an ongoing dialog concerning irrigation rights to waters drawn from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. **Over the past year, the PKK has increased the tempo of terrorist violence inside Turkey, and armed PKK surrogates in Syria have often clashed with rival factions.**

Who Are The PKK? A Short History

The PKK is part personality cult, part pro-Maoist political party, and part self-proclaimed medium for achieving Kurdish national independence. PKK members often refer to their imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, as "Apo," the Kurdish word for Uncle. Öcalan openly supports this practice: "Everyone should take notes of the way I live . . . The way I eat, the way I think, my orders, and even my inactivity" is worthy of study, because Apo regards himself as "a great teacher." PKK members commonly refer to themselves as "Apocos," or Apoists, underscoring Öcalan's influence in their lives.¹

While attending the Ankara School of Political Science in the 1970s, Öcalan immersed himself in Maoist ideology. By 1979 he had abandoned academic life in order to exclusively pursue a future dedicated to fighting what he viewed as Turkey's exploitation of its ethnic Kurds. He advocated violent revolution to replace the Turkish government with a united Kurdistan. He envisioned a new state that would embody a worker-peasant alliance and incidentally serve as a permanent manpower pool for a popular revolutionary army. The PKK's war for Kurdish national independence has cost the lives of between 30,000 and 40,000 Turkish citizens to date.

¹ Soner Cagaptay, "[Can the PKK Renounce Violence? Terrorism Resurgent,](#)" *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2007.



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Since the 1970s the PKK has tried to monopolize the Kurdish cause of national independence. Accordingly, it strove to either co-opt or destroy rival nationalist groups inside Turkey, to include rival Kurdish political parties that advocated nonviolence as the preferred path to independence.

The PKK attained national prominence in 1979 when it assassinated Mehmet Celal Bucak, a conservative politician and wealthy landowner in Eastern Turkey. Although the PKK has adopted various strategies and guises over the years, it has never entirely renounced violence. On July 6, 2006, PKK members killed Hikmet Fidam, leader of a splinter group in northern Iraq who preferred a nonviolent strategy for achieving independence. Violence directed against Turkish noncombatants and tourists is a PKK hallmark. **Typically the group uses women for suicide bombing missions in Turkey, and perpetrates kidnappings of foreigners, especially Europeans, and bombings of tourist sites frequented by Europeans.**

Meeting the PKK threat has long been the organizing principle of Turkey's foreign policy. Because ethnic Kurds inhabit portions of three other Middle Eastern countries—Iraq, Iran, and Syria, the PKK have become masters of using cross-border enclaves as safe havens from pursuers, as well as launching pads for incursions into Turkey. In the late 1990s, the Turkish government became so exasperated at PKK raids originating in Syria that it mobilized its armed forces, deployed units to the Syrian border, and threatened war unless Syria acted to prevent further PKK provocations. Strident Turkish warnings and demands led to negotiations that ultimately resulted in a regional understanding, formally called the Adana Protocol, named after the Turkish city that hosted the talks. Under the provisions of what some observers came to call “Pax Adana,” first Syria and later Iran agreed to stop supporting the PKK. As a by-product of the accord, Syria also expelled Öcalan, who formerly sought refuge inside its territory, setting up the conditions that facilitated his subsequent capture by Turkish authorities.





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PKK Aliases and Surrogates

Initially the Adana Protocol injected a measure of predictability into the complex mix of variables that affected Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Turkey and elsewhere. A temporary equilibrium prevailed wherein all parties to the agreement kept their end of the bargain. Meanwhile, the Turkish government apprehended Öcalan, tried and convicted him of treason, and sentenced him to life in prison despite a public outcry that demanded his execution. During this period, the PKK continued its propaganda campaign against the Turkish government, but temporarily brought violence down to a level that diminished the threat to regional stability. Meanwhile, in response to pressure from the European Union, Ankara implemented symbolic initiatives crafted to improve the lot of the Kurdish minority residing within its borders.

The PKK displayed considerable flexibility in adapting to the changed political landscape both inside Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East. With morale at a low ebb and its leader in prison, the organization announced a unilateral cease-fire in its conflict with the Turkish government, and attempted to reinvent itself as a peaceful political opposition. In 2004 the PKK attempted to change from a military organization with a political front, to a political party with a military component. In the spring of 2002, a Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) convened, announced that the PKK had “fulfilled its historical mission,” and announced intent to pursue a nonviolent path of political activism from that time forward. Later, in October 2003, the PKK changed its name to the Kurdistan Peoples’ Congress (KONGRA-GEL, or KGK). Over time, all the name-changes and political permutations proved to be superficial if not entirely cosmetic. The Turkish government argues that despite the name changes, “the leading members of the organization remain the same. Today, the PKK is still headed by Abdullah Öcalan, with Zübeyir Aydar, a former member of the ‘Kurdish National Congress,’ an affiliate of the PKK, its president. Furthermore, founders and leading figures of the PKK . . . continue to assume leading roles in the organization.”²

The National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) reported that the PKK gave its own cease-fire announcement an extremely broad interpretation, even as it staged selective tactical strikes against Turkish security forces. In May 2004 the PKK renounced its earlier self-declared unilateral cease-fire, indicating that after 1 June of that year it would exercise the prerogative of self-defense. The Turkish government interpreted this move by the PKK as a confirmation of

² [“PKK/Kongra-Gel.”](#) Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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the organization's terrorist nature and hostile intent." In 2005 still another PKK-affiliated organization styling itself the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks began targeting Turkish tourist destinations with the dual intent of punishing European nations for apprehending PKK sympathizers active in the international drug trade, and also destabilizing the Turkish economy.

PKK Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP)

- In October 2006, Öcalan, from his prison cell, again declared a "unilateral cease-fire," which temporarily reduced the number of terrorist attacks on civilian targets. Meanwhile **PKK strikes directed against Turkish Army and security forces continued.**
- In March 2007, the Freedom Hawks resumed their **attacks on resort areas** frequented by Western tourists, to punish European countries for apprehending PKK suspects.
- On 12 May 2007 a **bomb exploded** in the port city of Izmir in Turkey's Aegean Region, killing one person and injuring 14 others. PKK militants were the suspected perpetrators. Ten days later, on 22 May, an explosion occurred in the capital city of Ankara, at a major shopping center located near the Turkish parliament building. The blast killed six and wounded more than a hundred.
- In June 2007, PKK **cross-border provocations** increased the potential for a potential Turkish military response to root out militants from safe havens located inside Iraq.
- In October 2007, after **PKK rebels killed 13 Turkish soldiers in an ambush** in Sirnak province near the Iraqi border, the Turkish parliament formally sanctioned retaliatory raids into northern Iraq. Diplomatic maneuvering by the United States prevented Turkish authorities from turning this expedient into a reality.
- In the spring of 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Syria to counsel against over-reacting to Syria's popular uprising. Bashar Assad's government spurned these overtures, violently suppressed demonstrations in Hama shortly after Mr. Davutoglu left Damascus, and allowed the **PKK to re-establish bases in Syria.**
- Iran complemented the Syrian policy shift by reaching a new accord with PKK rebels that allows them to devote exclusive attention to **actions directed against Turkey.**
- A definite uptick of PKK violence has occurred in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. During the summer of 2012, the PKK stepped up its **attacks on Turkish military targets.**

Analyst Assessment

The Arab Spring of 2011 not only disturbed the equilibrium in Middle East politics, but also forced a major turning point in the Turkish government's relentless efforts to suppress the PKK and its violent agenda. Although a provisional accord brokered in July by the president of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government produced a temporary truce between the PKK's Syrian



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surrogate and its local Kurdish opposition, the Kurdish National Council, the arrangement may be short-lived. The Syrian fight against Assad has incidentally reinvigorated Kurdish national aspirations while Turkey, for its part, is unlikely to tolerate any diplomatic solution that would sanction an independent Kurdish entity within its territory. Meanwhile the PKK element inside Syria has been accused by local anti-Assad Turkish groups, as well as the Syrian National Council, of helping Bashar al-Assad by upholding his regime's authority in Kurdish communities along Syria's 560-mile northwestern border with Turkey. The story behind the current news headlines is that any military countermeasures taken by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in response to the deteriorating border situation could dramatically escalate the country's decades-long guerrilla war against the PKK. Most Turkmen regard the Syrian crisis as inseparable from the PKK movement and its perennial threat to the sovereignty of their homeland. The terrain found in the Amanos Mountains is inhospitable, very familiar to ethnic Kurds residing in the permeable border region, and a natural invasion route leading to the Turkish interior. All of these factors have potential implications for U.S. strategic response options in support of Turkey, its sole NATO ally in the Caucasus.

Training Implications

- Terrain comparable to that found in the Turkish/Syrian Amanos Mountains border region exists in some home station training environments.
- Small unit tactics inherent can be duplicated and adapted to home station training.
- Tactics used by PKK insurgents, including terrorist attacks directed against noncombatants, can be adapted for use by OPFOR role players.
- Understanding the ethnicity, goals, and political ideologies of players in an OE is critical for constructing and influencing a decisive action training environment.



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PKK Fighter

Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- [The Shabiha of Syria](#) (July 2012)
- [Civil Strife in Mali: Opportunity in Action](#) (October 2012)
- See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.
- For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).



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- AKO: <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>

Threat Products: AKO“Easy-Link”
Contemporary Operational Environment and Threat Integration Directorate

1. Login
2. “Click” Files
3. Search to:
TRADOC G2
TRISA-CTID
4. “Click” & Find !

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