

**Lessons from Contemporary Insurgency:  
The PKK's Enduring Fight**  
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MIBOLC Class 08-006  
31JUL08

“One chilly fall night in 1978, a small group of university dropouts and their friends gathered behind blacked out windows in Turkey’s southeast to plan a war for an independent Kurdish state. Driven by their revolutionary zeal and moral certitude, the young men and women did not see any serious barriers to their success.”

Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, page 1

## **Introduction**

The U.S. Military is currently engaged in fighting two very unique counter-insurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although arguably without peer conducting conventional military operations, the U.S. Military still has much to learn about counterinsurgency warfare. This case study examines the PKK’s evolution from a terror group to an insurgent organization focusing on lessons applicable to current U.S. Military operations. Part I examines the origins and background of the PKK, Part II addresses the current state of the PKK, and Part III analyzes the potential way ahead for the PKK.

Part I looks at the PKKs history in five phases. First, the origins and motivations of the PKK are explored. Phase I (1978-84) examines the PKKs earliest terrorist operations. Phase II (1984-99) examines the transition of the PKK from a strictly terrorist group to a true guerrilla force capable of conducting large scale conventional attacks. Phase III (1999-2004) describes the groups fade from relevance due to several factors including the capture of its charismatic leader in 1999, worldwide reluctance to embrace radical militant Islamic groups following the 9/11 attacks, and concessions made by the Turkish government to Kurds. Phase IV (2004-06) examines the reemergence of the PKK in a post-Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) era where the polarization of ethnic

groups and continued fighting in Iraq resurfaces the dream of a true Kurdish homeland, perhaps stronger than ever before. Part II (2007-08) of this paper examines the PKK's current operations and continued transformation from its earliest origins as an isolated terrorist group in Turkey, to its current position on the regional stage. Part II also examines the group's transition from the original, purely militant capability and agenda, to its continued efforts at achieving legitimacy and political power. Part III analyzes some potential way-ahead courses of action for the PKK. This analysis focuses on the PKK within the context of the regional geopolitical landscape.

## **PART I: The Origins and Background of the PKK**

### **Motivation, Method, and Ideology**

The PKK, or Kurdish Workers Party, was formally founded on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1978 with a formal proclamation of independence. Although it's difficult to identify a single catalyst for the group's creation, understanding the enduring struggle of the Kurds throughout the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provides very clear motivation. From the macro perspective the majority of Kurds were either under the control of a very oppressive Turkish government (those inside Turkey), under the control of the Iranians (the Iranian Kurds), or at war or on the run since 1946 (the Iraqi Kurds). From the micro perspective the original leadership of the PKK, including Abdallah Ocalan and Selahattin Celik, were both of very poor and modest beginnings. With a clearly articulated agenda – focusing on both communist ideology and Kurdish nationalism – the PKK was ready to fight the only way it could, through acts of terrorism.

Understanding the adoption of both communist *and* Kurdish nationalism ideologies is essential to fully appreciating the organizations ability to remain relevant

thirty years after its foundation. Today, although the PKK is no longer committed to a communist agenda, its agenda of advocating both Kurdish rights in Turkey and Kurdish Nationalism throughout the region ensure that it retains a mass base of support from Kurds both within Turkey and throughout the region.

The PKK is unique in that it straddles the traditional geographic boundaries between Europe and the Middle East. Although Turkey is predominately westernized economically, strengthening its ties to Europe, the populace is predominately Muslim, which strongly links the population to that of the Middle East. This has allowed the PKK to easily adopt the best practices of terrorist/insurgent groups from both Europe and the Middle East. Such flexibility in defining itself has also allowed the PKK to establish links to groups of its choosing – from early connections to the communist centric terror groups in Europe, to the PKKs later affiliations with Palestinian and Iraqi based militant Islamic groups.

It makes sense to first look at the PKK within the context of other European communist terrorist groups. Although communist political parties still exist in most westernized countries today, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the worldwide popularity and appeal of Marxist-Leninist communism has been dramatically reduced. The purely communist focused terrorist groups of Europe, such as the Red Brigade in Italy (1970-1988) and the Baader-Meinhof Gang / Red Army Faction in Germany (1970-1998), are no longer operational.<sup>8</sup> It's important to note that the ETA / Basque Separatists in Spain (1959-Present) still remain operational. Although the ETA adopted Marxist-Leninism in 1965, and even today advocate a socialist agenda, with the benefit of historical analysis it's obvious that the ETA adopted a communist ideology as a means to achieving their nationalist separatist agenda – very similar to the PKKs early

adoption of both a Marxist-Leninist ideology and nationalist/separatist agenda. Such distinctions between ideology and motivation are particularly relevant to the PKK, which continues to evolve both its methods and political ideology in pursuit of its underlying motivation: Kurdish nationalism.

For the U.S. Military, understanding an insurgent group's motivations is paramount. Although founded with communism and Kurdish Nationalism as dual ideologies, it has been the PKK's ability to adapt its methods that have kept it relevant. Understanding that the adoption of a radical ideology, be it Marxism-Leninism for European based insurgent organizations in the 1970s or Islamic Extremism for Middle Eastern based groups in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can in fact be less important than the motivation of the people who form the organizations support base. This is particularly relevant for the U.S. Military where today too often our enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan are broadly defined as Islamic Extremists or radical terrorists – when in fact the people who make up the base of support for insurgent organizations may have different and more immediate concerns. These motivations could include basic necessities for survival such as security from sectarian violence (in Iraq) or the ability to provide food for one's family or tribe (in Afghanistan). Just as politicians are often quoted as saying "all politics is local", the U.S. Military must refrain from broad generalizations and realize that when it comes to insurgencies, "all motivation is local".

### **Roots in Terror (1978-1984)**

"Turkey's southeastern region, due to a variety of geographic and historical factors, is far less developed than the western part of the country. The southeast is very mountainous and arid with hot and cold temperature extremes. Much of the region's economy is based on animal husbandry and its distance from the main population centers

in the west, has made it relatively less attractive for industrial development. It is in this milieu that the PKK seeks via the ruthless application of terror to establish a separate Kurdish state.”<sup>4</sup>

The PKK attempted to achieve and popularize its struggle from the very beginning by conducting terrorist operations such as assassinations and bombings. The most prominent of these include the 1979 attempted assassination of Mehmet Celal Bucak (a prominent Turkish government official and landowner), the 1980 bombing of the Turkish Consulate in Strasbourg, France, and the 1980 assassination of ex-Prime Minister Nihat Erim. These terrorist actions, from the very beginning of the PKKs existence, not only led it to quickly being classified as a terror group, but also made subsequent transitioning to a legitimate political organization more difficult. Since 1984, in an effort to distance itself from its early legacy as a violent communist terrorist group, the PKK has routinely changed its name. Between 1984 and 2008 it has called itself the KKK, KADEK, Kongra-Gel (Kurdistan People's Congress or KGK) and the KHK (Kurdistan People's Congress), to name but a few. Interestingly in 2005 the group began to refer to itself as the PKK again.<sup>1,7</sup>

The PKK has demonstrated its adaptability by adopting a completely different political ideology from its origins as a communist based group. In 2002, coming on the heels of the 9/11 attacks, the PKK formally announced that it was adopting a democratic ideology. This demonstrates the PKKs awareness to public opinion and the importance of having a legitimate political outlet. Despite its attempts at international legitimacy, changing its name, and even adopting democratic ideals, the PKK today is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States, NATO, and the EU.

## **Transition to Guerrilla Warfare (1984-1999)**

The period from 1984 to 1999 for the PKK is characterized by a transition from strictly acts of terrorism (such as bombings and assassinations) in Turkey, to guerrilla warfare basing out of and supported by Iraq, Iran, and Syria. By using areas outside of Turkey for training, logistical support, and sanctuary, the PKK was able to mass both forces and resources outside the reach of the Turkish military. Following the first Gulf War in 1991, Northern Iraq provided not only a traditional safe haven, but all the weapons the PKK could possibly want left over from Saddam's Army, forced to retreat south outside of the now Iraqi Kurd controlled areas in Northern Iraq.

The use of external sanctuaries by guerrilla forces makes counter-guerrilla operations extremely difficult for government counterinsurgency forces. Understanding the importance of the use of external sanctuaries by guerrilla forces in insurgency is particularly relevant for the U.S Military today. In Iraq the U.S. military faces off against Shia groups who have both safe haven and support in Iran, outside the reach of the American forces operating in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the U.S. Military is fighting Taliban insurgents who often strike from safe havens well inside Pakistan – also outside the reach of American forces. Examples of the effectiveness that external safe havens provide insurgencies are plentiful throughout history and include the SWAPOs use of sanctuary in Angola during the African Bush War (1966-1990) in Namibia, the Afghan Mujahedeen's use of safe havens inside Pakistan for training and refitting during the Soviet – Afghan War (1979-1988), and the use of North Vietnam by the Viet Cong in the early stages of the Vietnam War (1963-1975), to name but a few. In all three examples above, despite the counter-insurgency forces superior military capability over the insurgents, and even strikes or incursions into the safe havens, the insurgents continued to build military

capability inside a sanctuary while the counterinsurgency forces expended great political capital with marginal military effect.

During this guerrilla warfare phase of the PKK insurgency, the Turkish Government estimates as many as 37,000 people were killed as a result of PKK operations. Other more conservative reports put the casualties at 8,500 killed. Regardless of the exact number, the massing of PKK forces and logistics outside of Turkey in Iran, Iraq, and Syria enabled the PKK to transition to a very capable guerrilla force.

### **Fading Away (1999-2004)**

Despite the PKKs success in mobilizing as a guerrilla force in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the PKK suffered a series of setbacks beginning in the mid-1990s that not only halted the group's forward progress, but severely weakened the PKKs political, military, and mass base of support. The Turkish military, like most conventional militaries, was slow to adapt to the challenges of counterinsurgency warfare. However, as the protracted conflict stretched past ten years and into the early 1990s, the Turkish military became increasingly effective at targeting the PKKs leadership, employing population control measures, and fighting the PKK in counter-guerrilla operations. Coupled with the 1999 capture of the charismatic founder and leader of the PKK Abdallah Ocalan, and worldwide push-back against militant Islamic groups in the aftermath of 9/11, the PKK found itself in a very weak position both militarily and politically in the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2000 PKK ceasefire left the group isolated in the mountains of Northern Iraq with a decreasing mass base in Turkey and seemingly less relevance as the Iraqi Kurds gained legitimacy through administration of the semi-autonomous region of Northern Iraq. During this time period the PKK made



several unsuccessful attempts at securing political legitimacy. To most outsiders, and even those within the Turkish military, it looked as if the PKK would fade away into history.

### **Re-Emergence (2004-2006)**

Following the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime by U.S. forces in 2003, and the subsequent sectarian violence that followed throughout Iraq, the PKK has reemerged as a group pushing Kurdish rights and Kurdish nationalism. One factor that led to the reemergence of the PKK was the failure of the Turkish government to grant amnesty to members of the PKK. The lack of amnesty, coupled with a lack of success by Kurdish political groups in electing members to the Turkish government, led to increasing alienation of the Kurdish population in South Eastern Turkey. The ceasefire that had been in effect since 2000 gradually came apart during 2003 and was non-existent by 2004. Although the new wave of attacks wasn't carried out at the same scale as attacks in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the frequency of PKK attacks against Turkish police and security services increased.<sup>2</sup> With the security situation in Iraq becoming increasingly unstable during the spring of 2004 and continuing to worsen throughout 2005 and 2006, the PKK again found a safe haven in the farthest reaches of Northern Iraq. The Turkish government has been frustrated at both the US and Kurdish Regional Governments lack of support in fighting the PKK in Northern Iraq. As recently as December, 2007 the Turkish Ambassador to the United States claimed, "Turkey wants the KRG to stop giving logistical support to the PKK, stop giving the group airtime on its broadcast networks and ban it from creating "front parties" to take part in Kurdish elections".<sup>5</sup>

A lesson applicable to current U.S. Military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq is the importance of inclusion of isolated parties, especially former enemies, as legitimate

parties recognized by the government. A great example of the success of amnesty and inclusion is the “tribal awakening” in Iraq’s Anbar Province. Although too early to be classified as a success, there is no doubt that the U.S. efforts to reach out to and empowering Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar resulted in a drastic reduction in violence and a restoration of security throughout the Province. This lesson should not be forgotten as the U.S. continues to re-adjust its focus on Afghanistan and towards other areas of Iraq.

## **PART II: The PKK Today & Recent Turkish Incursions into Iraq (2007-2008)**

The PKK exists today classified as a terrorist group and predominantly located in the mountainous sanctuary of Northern Iraq. In October 2007 the PKK again made headlines with an escalation of attacks against the Turkish Military. The Turkish government quickly voted 507 to 19 for an incursion into Iraq to pursue the PKK fighters. Despite public pressure from the U.S. on Turkey to not violate the Iraqi border, the Turkish Military conducted a series of operations into Northern Iraq in December 2007. Tensions grew throughout the winter of 2007, leading to the largest Turkish Military incursion into Iraq from February 22<sup>nd</sup> through February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008. During this time the Turkish government claims that 240 PKK rebels and 27 Turkish soldiers were killed during combined arms attacks on PKK camps.

The Turkish government, by now having fought the PKK for thirty years, knew that allowing the PKK insurgents sanctuary in Northern Iraq would only embolden the group while at the same time tying the hands of Turkish counterinsurgency forces. By focusing the Turkish military incursion into the span of a week, the Turkish government was able to mitigate the political risk, claim a degree of success, and attack PKK camps thought to be out of reach of the Turkish Army. This example could be applied to U.S.

counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan where Taliban insurgents operate with almost complete freedom from safe havens across the border in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. As mentioned previously, destroying an insurgent organization requires patience and unrelenting persistence. Allowing an insurgent group the luxury of a sanctuary has historically resulted in lengthening the span of the conflict.

### **PART III: The PKKs Way Ahead**

With the PKKs pursuit of both Kurdish rights in Turkey and a greater Kurdish Nationalist agenda, we can expect continued escalation of violence on the Turkish-Iraqi border. As long as the PKK has the ability to reconstitute in the relative safe haven of Northern Iraq, it will be almost impossible for Turkish counterinsurgency forces to militarily defeat the PKK rebels. The Turkish government may have missed an opportunity for inclusion and amnesty of PKK rebels during the 2000-2004 ceasefire. During this period the PKK suffered a series of significant setbacks including worldwide pushback against Islamic terror groups following the 9/11 attacks and the capture of its founder and leader, Abdallah Ocalan. As long as the Kurdish population in Turkey seeks an organization to oppose the Turkish Government there will be a base of support for the PKK. This base of support extends into Northern Iraq where the PKK is often seen less as a terrorist group than a small group of rebels committed to fighting for Kurdish rights – a plight well known to the two major political parties currently in power running the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq.

With the polarization of Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups in Iraq forcing the resurfacing of the idea of an independent Kurdish state, the popular support base for the PKK in both Turkey and Northern Iraq can be expected to increase. Turkish incursions

into Iraq, though possibly militarily successful, could lead to negative regional or worldwide opinion, or even just simply cause the unification of the often disparate Kurdish public opinion.

Militarily, the PKK will most likely not be able to achieve significant success against the Turkish Army, which has slowly adapted during the past thirty years into a very credible security and counterinsurgency force. Terrorist style attacks inside Turkey, possibly even within the Turkish Capitol of Ankara, and continued skirmishes in the border regions can be expected. Despite PKK threats towards Kurdish politicians in Turkey, it is unlikely that the PKK will openly attack Kurdish targets for fear of ostracizing its mass base.

Until either an internationally recognized Kurdish homeland is established, or the need to fight for Kurdish rights in Turkey is no longer needed, the PKK can be expected to rise up to fill the requirement to fight for Kurdish rights. By continuing to successfully recruit and indoctrinate very young Kurds who feel as though they have no chance at success outside of armed insurgency, the PKK will be able to easily fill its ranks with committed fighters willing to make any sacrifice.

It is unlikely that the Turkish government will lose its will to fight the PKK, as recent votes in the Turkish government demonstrate. With the newly formed Iraqi government still struggling with internal security issues, and U.S. forces focused in central and southern Iraq, the safe havens in the remote mountainous regions of Northern Iraq will continue to offer the PKK sanctuary. The PKK remains a very adaptable and politically savvy organization, as demonstrated by its ability to adapt from a very small Marxist-Leninist terrorist group into a pro-democracy, Kurdish nationalist / separatist insurgency. The PKK can be expected to continue to adapt its methods into the future,

maintaining its agenda of pursuing Kurdish Rights in Turkey and a greater Kurdish Nationalism agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Studying the historical lessons of the PKKs enduring insurgency is important to the Army, which today is fighting two very different insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although no two insurgencies are the same, specific lessons can be learned and applied to the Army's current operations. Some of the applicable lessons from the PKK insurgency and the Turkish counterinsurgency efforts are: (1) the ability of terror or insurgent groups to adapt their political affiliations and ideology to suite their best interest, (2) the importance of safe havens for insurgent groups, and the difficulty they present to counterinsurgency forces, (3) the benefits of inclusion / amnesty to the government counterinsurgency effort and its second order effect of reducing the grievances and motivations of the insurgents base of support, and (4) the failure of a government and counterinsurgency strategy that fails to address the motivations of an insurgency and elects instead to attempt a purely military victory. Another lesson from the PKK is the protracted nature of their insurgency – now in its thirtieth year. Just as the Turkish Military was slow to transform into a credible counter-insurgency force, so to was the U.S. military slow in adapting the best practices of historical counter-insurgency efforts. With every battle of every war unique, and counterinsurgencies perhaps even more complex than conventional battle, it is imperative that the U.S. Army studies, identifies, and adopts proven strategies and tactics for defeating insurgencies.

## End Notes

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