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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied
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The Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey

Summary

Kurdish extremists appear to have faltered in their effort to create a classic rural insurgency in Turkey's southeastern provinces over the past year. The Turkish government's military and civil response to the attempted insurgency appears to be effective, factionalism has weakened the insurgents, and crucial sources of foreign support—especially from Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani—have proved fickle. At this stage, the campaign initiated by the extremists, a group called the Kurdish Workers Party, appears to have degenerated into a combination of terrorism, banditry, and blood-feuding. As such, it does not pose a threat to the Turkish government's control of southeastern Turkey.

This said, however, Kurdish extremism remains likely to pose a threat to Turkish and possibly US interests in Turkey over the next several years. The threat is most likely to take the form of terrorist attacks against Turkish politicians, local government and security officials and installations, US military and contractor.
personnel, and local Turkish petroleum facilities.

A History of Kurdish Violence

The phenomenon of Kurdish insurgency is not new. In the 1920s and 1930s, the new Turkish Republican Government in Ankara suppressed four separate Kurdish rebellions with military force, including the bombing of villages. Kurdish rebelliousness was fed by the hostility of devout Kurdish tribesmen to the secular republic and the resentment of traditionally autonomous tribal leaders of the encroachments of the central government. After a hiatus of almost four decades, Kurdish violence reemerged as a serious problem in the 1970s, this time inspired by foreign models and Marxist doctrines.

Ankara's Kurdish Solution

Modern Turkish governments have attempted to assimilate the Kurds by suppressing their cultural identity and theoretically offering equal opportunity. The teaching of the Kurdish language and literature is forbidden, and the use of the language in government offices and courts is prohibited. The very existence of the Kurds as a separate ethnic group is denied—officially they are "mountain Turks." On the other hand, there are no formal barriers to the advancement of assimilated Kurds, and Turkish officials can cite the examples of individual Kurds who have been highly successful in business and professional life.

In practice, opportunity and reward have been the province of select groups. Kurdish elites have been rewarded for their renunciation of nationalism by assimilation into Turkish society—often at a high socio-economic level. Local political power has been portioned out on a tribal basis. The strongest tribe in a province invariably controls the strongest political party. Urbanization and modernization have contributed to the Government's assimilation efforts by breaking down tribal structures. Many Kurdish youth born of parents who have moved to the large cities in the west of Turkey never learn to speak Kurdish.
The rise of militant Kurdish autonomy movements in Iran and Iraq—particularly the struggle of the conservative Iraqi Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani—aroused widespread sympathy and support among Turkish Kurds, and contributed to the reappearance of unrest among them in the 1960s. The violent movements that surfaced in the 1970s, however, were the creation of leftist university students and assimilated professionals and owed more to Marxism than traditional tribal attitudes.

--- The first separatist groups to appear advocated autonomy for a Turkish "Kurdistan" in federation with a socialist or communist Turkish state.

--- Many other Kurds became directly involved with the mainstream of Turkish terrorism; they probably did not comprise a majority in these groups but they clearly were heavily represented in them.

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 lent new impetus to the Kurdish autonomy movement in Turkey. Both combatants attempted to weaken their enemy by aiding Kurdish dissidents. Extremist Kurds in Turkey benefitted from the burgeoning arms flow to Iraqi and Iranian Kurds and from the inability of Iran and Iraq to police their mountainous borders with Turkey. Iran's use of Iraqi Kurdish fighters to spearhead a spring 1983 offensive into northern Iraq created something of a safehaven for Kurdish extremists operating against Turkey and allowed them to launch an insurgency last fall.

Recent Developments

Over the past year, Kurdish extremists have carried out a series of violent operations in southeastern Turkey. The violence was part of a plan to destabilize Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast.
The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)

The PKK is the first significant terrorist group to put Kurdish independence above the goal of a "classless" society in Turkey. Before the military takeover of 1980, the PKK was active in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Ankara and Izmir and in Turkey's rural and impoverished southeast. The PKK has some support in the Kurdish migrant community in Europe, especially in West Germany. Other PKK members were forced into exile elsewhere in Western Europe and in the Middle East after the 1980 military takeover. It was widely regarded as the most violent of all Kurdish separatist groups in Turkey.

The PKK is bitterly opposed to more Marxist Kurdish groups, such as the Union of the Left, a coalition of Kurdish and leftist groups reportedly backed by the Turkish Communist Party. PKK attacks against this and other rival groups increased markedly after the PKK insurgency effort in Turkey ran into problems last year.

The PKK appears to have links with the Kurdish tribal power structure in the east and rival leftists have accused it of being little more than a hit squad.

The resurgence of the PKK, which had been disrupted by the military takeover of September 1980, appears to be in large part the result of support from Iraqi Kurds. Although details are unclear, the PKK appears to have come to an agreement with Iraqi Kurdish dissident leader Masoud Barzani in 1983 to use territory under his control as a base for attacks into Turkey.
Foreign Support

Although the PKK has operated from territory controlled by Barzani, there is no evidence that he has provided large amounts of material and weapons assistance. Instead, it is likely that Barzani or some of his allies have provided training to PKK members in return for their occasional assistance as arms smugglers and guerrillas. A reported link between the PKK and the Iranian-supported Kurdish Islamic Party (Hizbi-Islami), an ally of Barzani, may consist of such a training-for-fighters exchange. The PKK's secularism is not ideologically palatable to the Khomeini-sponsored Hizbi-Islami, however, and their alliance will probably not be very long-lived.

Libya also has sparked Ankara's suspicion by its frequent pronouncements of solidarity with the "oppressed peoples of Kurdistan," most recently in mid-April. The Libyans have denied involvement, but some of the aid they provide Barzani and the Palestinians probably "trickles down" to Turkish groups. In addition, Libyan leader Qadhafi strongly supports the Kurdish Islamic Party, Hizbi Islami, with which the PKK reportedly has cooperated.
Guerrilla Attacks

In the summer of 1984 the PKK formed a guerrilla unit called "Hezzen Rizgariye Kurdistan" (HRK)—Kurdistan Liberation Unit—composed of PKK members, members of other Kurdish and leftist groups, and possibly some Armenian terrorists. The goal of the HRK was to carry out "armed propaganda" among Turkish Kurds and eventually undermine Turkish control of the Kurdish areas.

The HRK began its campaign on 15 August 1984 with coordinated attacks against "Jandarma"* posts in township centers in Siirt and Hakkari provinces. Since that time, according to press reports the insurgents have clashed over thirty times with Turkish security forces; the clashes claimed the lives of 56 Turkish soldiers. About 97 insurgents have died as a result of these operations.

The insurgents appear to have tried to ally with tribes having close family connections with tribes in Syria and Iraq, so as best to exploit a primitive logistics net reaching from Turkey to safe havens across the border.

Tactics have included direct assaults on Jandarma posts, ambushes of military vehicles, strafing of Jandarma posts to draw soldiers into ambushes, the murder of suspected informants and collaborators, attacks on local Kurdish politicians, and at least one rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attack against a "loyalist" village.

*"Jandarma" are paramilitary units formally subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, but under Turkish General Staff control during states of emergency or war, and have the role of police in rural Turkey.
The Stalled Insurgency

As a result of a concerted Turkish Government response, factionalism within the movement, and an apparent weakening of the PKK's alliance with Barzani, the insurgency appeared to have run aground by spring. A large-scale renewal of rebel attacks the Jandarma had anticipated in late March or April did not occur. In the past three months, we have had few reports of an insurgent-initiated attack. Recently there have been reports of sporadic attacks by insurgents against security forces and groups of foreigners in the area of Mt. Ararat. No foreigner has been killed in the largely propaganda-motivated actions.

Government Response

By October 1984, the central government had developed a concerted strategy of military and civic action to meet the insurgent campaign.

We believe Turkish forces probably have made several small-scale incursions into Iraq in the past year; one clash with insurgents reportedly occurred on the Iraqi side of the border near Shirwan.

Reports of a series of firefight in late April and May suggested that a long-rumored sweep operation, perhaps on a large-scale, was underway. These operations may have complicated the insurgents' efforts by interdicting lines of communication between refuge areas in Iraq and target areas in Turkey.
reports of the possible formation of a new light infantry division in the southeast, but we do not have information confirming this step.

We believe the amount of Turkish military resources committed so far to the anti-Kurdish effort is not significant enough to affect Turkey's ability to fulfill its NATO responsibilities. Most troops involved probably are Jandarma, which would only provide indirect support to NATO. It is probably true, however, that the insurgency effort has drawn down Turkey's already limited capabilities in certain fields critical to the counter-insurgency effort but marginal with regard to Turkey's NATO responsibilities. For example, reports that as of mid-May, almost all of Turkey's helicopters had been devoted to counter-insurgency operations in support of a major "sweep."

Ankara also has undertaken civic action programs in the area of military operations, including the distribution of weapons to "loyal" villages.

According to press reports and US consulate officials in Adana, civilian administrators have continued to emphasize the socio-economic development programs for the southeast initiated by Prime Minister Turgut Ozal. Although the results of such programs will not be seen for a decade, the government's emphasis on economic development, not merely security, is probably a welcome change for many locals.
Finally, the Jandarma--at first ill-trained and poorly equipped--is now performing better.

indication that the tide is turning in favor of the Jandarma is that insurgents are surrendering to security forces conducting sweeps, rather than fighting to the death, as was the case earlier in the campaign.

Factionalism

Factionalism within the movement has also greatly weakened the insurgency.

for the indefinite future, Kurdish extremists will be spending more time struggling against one another than fighting the Turkish Government.

In addition to defections and opposition from leftist Kurdish groups, the PKK may also be faced with opposition from conservative Kurds who believe the PKK is still too leftist.
Declining Support

Finally, foreign support—instrumental in the PKK's early successes—may have weakened.*

*The Barzani family has a history of betraying—in some cases, murdering—erstwhile allies in Turkey when their activities risk bringing down the wrath of the Turkish Army on Iraqi Kurdistan. Even Masoud Barzani, whose sometime collaboration with the PKK departs from his father's restraint, realizes he has a strong self-interest in preventing the misuse of his territory by Turkish Kurds.
-- Such involvement would weaken Iraq, which has benefitted from substantial Soviet arms aid;

-- Kurdish movements are unpredictable and wildly unorthodox in ideological views.

Outlook: A Proto-Insurgency Reverts to Terrorism

If, as seems likely, the Turks continue to thwart PKK efforts to stir up an insurgency in the southeast, we believe violent Kurdish activism will revert to a pattern of terrorism and internecine struggle. A more remote but nonetheless real possibility is that US personnel and facilities will also become Kurdish targets.

Kurdish groups in Turkey do not have a history of targeting US personnel and facilities. Their targets have been symbols of the central government's presence—especially military and police installations and provincial government buildings. However, PKK literature asserts that US and NATO facilities are "props" to the "colonialist" regime in Ankara, suggesting possible ideological groundwork for attacks against NATO and US targets. The PKK, moreover, models itself on the PLO and Armenian terrorist groups and undertakes violence purely for psychological effect. The murder of US personnel in the area could make the symbolic point that the "colonialist" regime is not capable of protecting its collaborators. Iraqi Kurds—whom the PKK emulates—also have a history of kidnapping and sometimes killing foreigners to put pressure on the Baghdad government.
the Turkish Government is concerned at present that the PKK and other Kurdish organizations will be strengthened by Syrian and Libyan plans to exploit Kurdish activism for their own aims. Although Turkish fears of a large-scale Syrian and Libyan effort to aid Turkish Kurds are probably unrealistic, at least some of the aid the two governments provide to Iraqi Kurdish and Palestinian clients is bound to "trickle down" to small-time groups such as the PKK. Libya or Syria might eventually turn to the PKK to operate against rival Palestinian, Israeli, Iraqi, and US targets in Turkey.
SUBJECT: The Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey

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