

A RESURGENT PKK CONFRONTS TURKEY

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The summer is typically a time of heightened activity by the Kurdistan Workers Party, popularly known by its Kurdish acronym the PKK, and designated by Turkey, the United States, and the EU as a terrorist organization. The PKK's primary targets are Turkish security forces as well as state economic and social assets, but the group's attacks claim civilian victims as well. Dispelling claims made by Turkish officials that it has been weakened by arrests and desertions, the PKK has unleashed nearly a hundred terror attacks during a five-month span between April and August 2012, causing fear and revulsion throughout the country. According to a tally by Mehmet Ali Birand, the acclaimed Turkish journalist, the PKK attacks have claimed the lives of 102 and injured 200 Turks and Kurds. It is estimated that an even larger number of Kurdish guerrillas lost their lives in clashes as well. But what has shocked most Turks is the resilience and success of the PKK to strike with virtual impunity anywhere in the country.

The PKK's uprising against the Turkish state began in 1984 in a bid to achieve Kurdish independence. Although the organization has suffered occasional setbacks particularly when its leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured and jailed in 1999, it has proved to be resilient and able to attract a steady stream of young Kurds to join the armed struggle for Kurdish self-rule. The powerful Turkish military, locked in an asymmetric struggle with Kurdish fighters who use classical guerrilla tactics, cannot defeat them. But neither can the PKK win a military victory against the Turkish state and compel its government to accede to its demands. It is thus widely acknowledged in Turkey, even in government circles and among Kurdish nationalist groups, that only a political settlement can settle the Kurdish issue.

The AKP government has insisted that it will not negotiate with terrorists. At the same time, recognizing that there is no realistic prospect of a settlement that does not involve the insurgents, it has engaged in occasional secret talks with senior PKK members including Ocalan, its jailed leader. These have proved fruitless. The problem is that there exists a seemingly unbridgeable gap between Kurdish nationalist demands and what the Turkish government is willing or considers politically expedient to offer, at least in the short term. Three major demands made by the PKK and its parliamentary wing, the Peace and Democracy Party (the BDP) are especially problematic. These are: (i) that Turkey revise its constitution to provide guarantees for Kurdish language and culture on a par with Turkish, (ii) that Kurdish education be provided in state schools at all levels, that is kindergarten to University, where Kurds are

predominant, and most controversially (iii) that Kurds be granted autonomy in the country's southeastern provinces. These demands appear to be supported by virtually all shades of opinion among Kurds.

Ironically, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan that has been in power for the past decade, has done more than previous governments to advance Kurdish rights. Enshrining Kurdish language rights in a new constitution may not be a far-fetched proposition but is problematic in the short term as opposition parties' obduracy will likely thwart the AKP's current bid to adopt a new charter. On the other hand, the government has already taken a significant step forward by introducing limited Kurdish education in state schools. While this has not satisfied Kurdish nationalists, it represents a beginning and is likely to be expanded in the coming years.

But it is the autonomy issue that is the most contentious and represents the biggest impediment to achieving progress on the Kurdish issue. Kurdish nationalists would like Turkey to become a federal state and for the Kurdish region to exercise a wide measure of autonomy. Called 'democratic autonomy' by the PKK, it is unclear what competences the envisaged Kurdish autonomous region would exercise and how much authority Ankara would retain over it. In its report entitled *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, issued on September 11, 2012, the International Crisis Group bluntly stated that '... even leaders who espouse it admit they do not know what it means'. However, the ambiguity of the autonomy proposal is not the biggest problem for the AKP government. What Ankara fears most all is that the type of autonomy demanded by Kurdish nationalists would create a slippery slope to outright secession, particularly as the Erdogan government believes that the PKK has not entirely abandoned its goal of independence and that it will assume the leadership in a future autonomous Kurdish region.

The PKK appears to have become emboldened both by its apparent ability to keep the Turkish military on the defensive, and also by encouraging regional developments. Across the Iraqi border, the Kurdish Regional Government (Iraqi Kurdistan) has been consolidating its position as a de facto state, and in neighbouring Syria, Kurds have assumed control of Kurdish-majority areas on the Turkish border for the first time. Among some Kurds these developments have re-kindled ambitions of an independent Kurdistan that would incorporate the Kurdish-majority lands in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. However, such aspirations are totally unrealistic, as are any expectations that the Erdogan government will offer better terms to the Kurds while the PKK continues to commit acts of terrorism. At the same time, as the International Crisis Group cited above recommends, the government should proceed to address legitimate Kurdish demands by bringing about, among other measures, 'more decentralized local government and removal of discriminatory ethnic bias in the constitution and laws'.