

Spillover of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) insurgency to Germany

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Republic of Germany recruited thousands of Turkish citizens to work in its industries and services. Many were of Kurdish ethnic background. Kurds form a substantial minority in Turkey, and their culture and traditions were not recognized by the Turkish state until the early twenty-first century. This seemed to be of little political consequence during the mass recruitment period, but became a political issue as Kurdish aspirations for independence or autonomy galvanized during the 1980s. The PKK emerged as an important Kurdish separatist organization leading an armed insurrection against the Turkish Republic.

Up to one-third of the over 2 million Turkish citizens resident in Germany by the 1990s were of Kurdish origin. Perhaps 50,000 of these individuals sympathized with the PKK and up to 12,000 became active members of the party or its front organizations (Boulanger, 2000:23). By striking at Turkish consulates, airlines and businesses, the PKK transformed Germany and other Western European states into a second front. Moreover, Turkish repression of the PKK-led insurgency, which took tens of thousands of lives, complicated diplomatic ties with EU member states. Turkish counterinsurgency measures included mysterious death squads and the uprooting and forced relocation of millions of Kurdish civilians. This backdrop rendered PKK activities on German soil and German and Turkish countermeasures highly emotive and significant. By the mid-1990s, the PKK had become a vital German national security concern, particularly after the PKK leader, Abdallah Öcalan, threatened to send suicide bombers against German targets in retaliation for German assistance to Turkey in its struggle with the PKK.

Despite the German decision to outlaw the PKK and its front organizations, the PKK possessed an extensive organizational infrastructure in Germany and nearby European states. PKK tactics featured protest marches and hunger strikes. Street demonstrations on Kurdish and Turkish issues, though routinely banned by German authorities, frequently resulted in violent clashes. In 1996, the German government sought to strengthen its ban on PKK street protests by making participation in such events a major offence. Several Kurdish protesters were subsequently apprehended and recommended for deportation, even though hunger strikes in Turkish prisons had cost the lives of numerous prisoners and the torture and ill-treatment of Kurdish prisoners was believed to be commonplace. As a result, the deportation

of Kurdish activists raised important legal and human rights issues, which polarized German public opinion.

The arrest of Abdallah Öcalan by Turkish authorities in 1999 sparked a massive wave of Kurdish protests in Europe and as far away as Australia. Three Kurds were killed after trying to enter the Israeli consulate in Berlin and scores of protesters were injured. During his subsequent trial, Öcalan called upon his followers to abandon armed struggle, which resulted in reduced Kurdish militant activities on German soil, but the unresolved Kurdish question remained and, with it, the potential for renewed conflict. Such concerns undoubtedly contributed to Germany's opposition to the US-led attack upon Iraq in 2003, which damaged diplomatic relations between the long-time allies.

As the Iraq war evolved into a protracted quagmire for the USA, German apprehensions about the invasion appeared well founded. In addition to the huge toll of killed and wounded, at least 2 million refugees flowed to nearby states, some of whom were resettled in Europe, particularly in Sweden). In the largely autonomous Kurdish-ruled enclave in northern Iraq, remnants of the PKK reorganized and, by 2007, launched strikes on Turkish troops within Turkey. Kurdish militants similarly attacked targets in Iran from Iraqi territory. Both Iran and Turkey struck back, and a major escalation of fighting appeared possible as Turkish aircraft and soldiers attacked PKK targets inside Iraqi territory in late 2007 and early 2008. The dangerous standoff remained frozen and serious clashes between the Turkish forces and PKK guerrillas erupted anew in 2012.

The descent of neighbouring Syria into civil war in 2012 generated a large outflow of refugees and compounded Turkish apprehensions when Syrian military forces in the heavily Kurdish north-eastern area of Syria handed over effective control to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a longstanding ally of the PKK. This raised the spectre of a confederation of Kurdish territories in northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria, a possible embryonic Kurdish state (Gardner, 2012:9). The scenario underscored the need for the Turkish Republic to address Kurdish grievances.

References

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