

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN FOREIGN POLICY

COMBATING TERRORISM WORKING GROUP



WORKING GROUP

COMBATING TERRORISM

KURDISH TERRORISM: THE KURDISTAN WORKER'S PARTY INSURGENCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**Combating Terrorism Working Group Brief 3.0
October 1, 2018**

Author

Kevin Truitte

Red Team

Steven Hoodjer
Kaitlyn Smithwick

Editors

Zach Dickens
Ryan Young

The views expressed herein are the views and opinions of the coordinators and contributors, and do not reflect or represent the views of any of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

Abstract

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is a transnational terrorist group that has conducted an active insurgency in southeastern Turkey since the 1980s. Blending Marxist-Leninist revolutionary political ideology with ethnic Kurdish nationalism, the group has seized on opportunities fueled by the discontent of a Kurdish population which has been denied cultural, linguistic, and political rights by the Turkish Republic since the country's founding in the 1920s. Sporadic attempts at reconciliation between the PKK and the Turkish state under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) during the 2000s ultimately collapsed in 2015. Since then, a new round of violence has shaken Turkey and has shown no signs of abating. The PKK has employed asymmetrical terror tactics, from urban warfare and rural insurgency to high profile terror attacks in major Turkish cities, in its war against the Turkish government.

The group continues to adapt and diversify its strategy, expanding its reach across greater Kurdistan—a contiguous, ethnically-Kurdish region spanning across southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and northwestern Iran. PKK branches in Iran and Syria have continued to operate autonomously, with a new affiliate emerging as a defender of the Yezidi minority in Iraq. As a result of the ongoing Syrian civil war and subsequent power vacuum, the Syrian branch, the People's Protection Units (YPG), was able to seize territory along the Turkish Border. With the support of Western governments, particularly the United States and its European allies, this branch stands poised to eclipse the main PKK as its statelet develops self-governance and military capabilities. PKK-linked forces have fought alongside Western military forces against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), while continuing their insurgency within Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) member. The [United States](#) and the [European Union](#) both designate the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization. The PKK and the rising power of its regional affiliates represent challenges to Turkish domestic security, regional stability, and to US and Western policymakers attempting to balance defeating the remnants of ISIL with the domestic security of a NATO ally.

History

The ethnic Kurdish population is one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world. Within the Middle East [today](#), there are nearly 25-35 million Kurds spread across Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The largest number resides in Turkey. Since 1924, the Turkish government has actively worked to [undermine](#) ethnic Turkish Kurds' political existence. The Turkish government has long sought to crush attempts by the Kurds to organize politically, using violence and other coercive means to suppress Kurdish nationalism. For example, in the 1978 [Maras Massacre](#), Turkish intelligence killed 111 Alevi Kurds as part of a broader campaign of violence targeting Turkey's Kurdish population.

It was from this repression that the PKK emerged. [Influenced](#) by 1970s radical leftist movements, the group was founded as a Marxist-Leninist vanguard movement for Kurdish identity, seeking to establish an independent Kurdistan; their military wing began operations in 1984. The group attracted followers from Kurdish communities in the wake of the Turkish military's 1980 coup d'état and the Turkish government's subsequent violent tactics used to [crackdown](#) on any semblance of Kurdish identity. This [included the prohibition](#) on the use of the Kurdish language under threat of imprisonment. It funded itself through Kurdish expatriate networks in Europe and criminal enterprises such as drug and human trafficking. When PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested through [joint efforts](#) by Turkish security forces and American intelligence in 1999, the group [passed through a series](#) of unilateral ceasefires and relocated its leadership to the mountains of northern Iraq.

The 2002 electoral victory of the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan brought the potential for an end to the decades-long insurgency. Beginning with secret meetings in 2009, AKP government representatives and the PKK [declared a two year ceasefire](#) in 2013, which was to establish a formal peace process. Turkey's Kurdish population [began to view](#) Prime Minister (then President) Erdogan as their best chance for a lasting reconciliation and greater cultural and political rights within the country. However, the peace process would dissolve just two years later, the victim of domestic political considerations and instability from Syria.

A Multi-Layered Insurgency inside Turkey

The last PKK-Turkey ceasefire broke down in mid-2015 due to missteps by both parties. The Turkish government [walked away](#) from a proposed peace plan in February 2015, leaving talks in doubt. The unexpected surge in support for the pro-Kurdish, pro-peace Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the 2015 elections denied the AKP of its parliamentary majority. This further eroded Erdogan and the AKP-led government's interest in continuing negotiations. Tensions escalated as Kurds in Turkey and in Syria accused Turkish intelligence of supporting ISIL against the YPG and failing to intervene in late 2014 to protect the Syrian city of Kobane from the terrorist group. The PKK's execution of two Turkish police officers accused of "collaborating" with ISIL provided the excuse for the Turkish government and the PKK to renew their "war."

The PKK's return to conducting an active insurgency capitalized on reinvigorated Kurdish nationalism throughout the region. The fight against ISIL's onslaught sowed a romanticized Kurdish resistance that the PKK used to bolster its ranks inside Turkey and across greater Kurdistan. Within Turkey, the insurgency has manifested in three different ways: urban warfare in southeastern Kurdish cities, a traditional asymmetrical insurgency in Turkey's southeastern countryside, and high-profile mass casualty attacks in major Turkish metropolitan areas. The insurgency in Turkey has continued to evolve as Turkish Security Forces conduct a pacification campaign across the country's Kurdish southeast.

In late 2014, [Kurdish youths rioted](#) against Turkey's failure to intervene in Kobane. The riots and subsequent police crackdown killed several dozen protesting Kurds. The subsequent unrest provided a fertile recruiting ground for the PKK's youth political wing, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), which was founded in 2013. Even before the PKK negated the ceasefire, the YDG-H began to fortify neighborhoods in Kurdish cities across southeastern Turkey. The [YDG-H evolved into the Civil Protection Units \(YPS\)](#), an urban insurgency that forced Turkish security forces (TSK) to clear cities block by block. The resulting urban warfare resulted in high TSK casualties. [Evidence strongly suggests](#) the YPS received direction, training, and weaponry from the PKK's central leadership, as well as embedded PKK snipers to exact heavy casualties against Turkish forces. By mid-2016, security forces had [flushed out](#) the YPS, retaken the neighborhoods, and bulldozed the areas to the ground.

The insurgency in the countryside [escalated](#) as the urban war subsided. The PKK's armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (HDG), traditionally fought in the mountains of southeastern Turkey. They used improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle-borne IEDs, and ambushes. Occasionally, more advanced weapon platforms such as anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) were deployed against Turkish armor and [helicopters](#). The PKK's war in Kurdish towns and villages has also seen an upsurge in [intra-Kurd violence](#). The group increased attacks and assassinations against village guards, ethnic Kurdish paramilitaries paid by the Turkish government to fight against Kurdish militants. As the Turkish state continues to target Kurdish political and cultural rights, the PKK is able to draw recruits from the disaffected population. While the failed 2016 coup d'état and subsequent purge of the ranks of the military and police [reduced offensive operations](#) against the PKK, the terrorist group has maintained and even increased the capability to conduct attacks.

[Founded](#) in rejection of a 2004 PKK ceasefire with the Turkish state, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) have launched terror attacks in various Turkish cities, including Ankara and Istanbul. TAK has conducted mass-casualty attacks against both government and civilian targets. While ostensibly separate from the PKK, TAK [likely receives](#) training, weapons, and strategic direction from PKK central leadership. TAK attacks [provide](#) stress relief for the main PKK in the southeast, redirecting the attention of the security forces while giving the PKK room to denounce the group's attacks. Recently, TAK has conducted suicide attacks, to include the use of VBIED's, against soft targets in Istanbul, Ankara, and other major Turkish cities. Unlike the main PKK, which publicly decries civilian casualties, TAK [justifies](#) attacks on tourist destinations as legitimate, in order to [undermine](#) the Turkish economy.

The PKK Outside of Turkey: Syria, Iraq, and Iran

The PKK's affiliate branches outside of Turkey have also seen success in the past several years. Besides expanding the ability of the PKK to conduct its war in Turkey, these branches have also established themselves as independently influential players in the internal geopolitics of Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), succeeded in carving out an autonomous statelet from the country's civil war. The YPG's defense of Kobane, and its war against ISIL, served not only as a [rallying cry](#) for Kurdish nationalism, but also saw it become the United States' preferred [ally of choice](#) in its campaign against ISIL as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition. With US [air support and weapons](#), the SDF [retook areas of east and north](#) Syria including the former capital of ISIL's caliphate, Raqqa. Despite outwardly separate organizations, PKK leadership and PKK-trained cadres [dominate decision-making positions in the PYD](#) and maintain parallel structures to exert control over PYD-held areas in Syria.

PKK-affiliates have also conducted attacks in Kurdish-majority areas of northwest Iran and established a foothold in northwestern Iraq. In Iran, the PKK-affiliated [Kurdistan Free Life Party](#) (PJAK) carries out occasional [low-level attacks](#) on Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps forces and border guards. In Iraq, the PKK based its leadership in the remote Qandil Mountains, where it trained fighters and planned operations. The group also sent forces to fight alongside the Yezidis of Sinjar against ISIL after Iraqi Kurdish forces withdrew. The group [aided in the establishment and training](#) of the local Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), tied to the new Yezidi Democracy and Freedom Party (PADY). These new affiliates [even provided the group](#) an opportunity—albeit an unsuccessful one—for a seat in the Iraqi Parliament in the 2018 Iraqi elections. While hundreds of PKK fighters [withdrew](#) from Sinjar in Spring 2018, the YBS [remains](#) as part of local Iraqi security forces.

The PKK's presence regionally stands to cause wider tensions. The use of Syria as a safe haven for PKK forces has prompted Turkish forces to intervene along its border, first through [Operation Euphrates Shield](#), which seized the town of al-Bab from ISIL to prevent its capture by the YPG, and more recently through the [conquest](#) of the Kurdish enclave of Afrin. President Erdogan now threatens military action against the SDF-controlled Manbij, where the U.S. and its allies [maintain](#) a presence. In Iraq, Turkey has not only conducted [airstrikes](#) against PKK leadership in the Qandil mountains and PKK-affiliates [in Sinjar](#), but also has [moved troops](#) across the border into Iraqi Kurdistan and [threatened](#) future military action in Sinjar. Turkey's willingness to intervene in neighboring states over the PKK could not only lead to conflict between Turkey and those states, such as with the [Syrian regime, Iraq](#), or the Iraqi [Kurdish Regional Government](#), but also with their patrons including Russia and the [United States](#). Such conflict would likely benefit the PKK and its affiliates, which would in turn feedback into the insurgency within Turkey's borders.

Policy Recommendations

Successfully countering the PKK requires policy makers to address the underlying concerns that gave rise to and continue to empower the group, most prominently of which are the lack of fundamental rights of Turkey's Kurdish citizens. The United States and its European allies should prioritize engagement with Turkey to persuade the country to reduce its efforts to suppress the political and cultural rights of the Kurds in Turkey, with the understanding that these oppressive efforts have only contributed to discontent and fed the PKK's narrative. This engagement will require the combination of political and economic incentives along with punishments for Turkey. President Erdogan and the Turkish government must be made to understand that the PKK is merely the symptom of a broader disconnect between the Turks and Kurds and cannot be addressed purely through force. Kurdish political parties, such as the People's Democratic Party (HDP), could provide an outlet in politics for the grievances of the country's Kurds, without turning to violence. In the long-term, stability in Turkey's southeast will depend on integrating Turkey's Kurdish population into the country's political system as equal citizens of the Turkish republic without depriving them of their identity—a major cause of tensions and discontent. Economically, Turkish officials and companies that support or engage in rights abuses of the Kurdish population could be targeted by sanctions or travel restrictions. The U.S. and other NATO allies of Turkey should continue to provide intelligence support to Turkey's operations against PKK cadres, but with the caveat that such cooperation

and assistance, in addition to broader cooperation with Turkish Security Forces, might be withdrawn should Turkey not simultaneously pursue a negotiated settlement as the final objective of these operations.

The United States and the European Union should seek to bring financial and political pressure the PKK and its backers in order to bring the insurgent group to the table. Financiers of the PKK and its branches must be held accountable to terror financing laws, and criminal enterprises run by the terror group should be targeted with financial sanctions. In addition, the United States should work to pressure other Kurdish groups working or associating with the PKK, to disassociate themselves from the terrorist organization. The United States and its NATO allies should engage directly with Turkey's Kurdish community, including but not limited to political parties such as the HDP, to encourage local pressure against the PKK to abandon its terrorist tactics and show the group that it will lose local support should it continue these activities.

The United States has worked closely with the PYD/YPG against ISIL in Syria. This gives the US and the West significant leverage over the group, which increasingly has become a major player in the Syrian context. Security and economic support for security forces and reconstruction efforts in areas under control of the YPG must be conditioned on the group preventing Syrian territory under its control from being used by the PKK, or even the YPG itself, for cross-border attacks against Turkish security forces. Economic pressure against the PYD, including the threat of sanctions or travel restrictions against top leaders, would also serve to influence the group towards these ends. As the PYD's political power eclipses the PKK proper, the group's ties to the latter can provide a means to bring pressure on the main PKK in Turkey and its leadership in Qandil. Political incentives to the PYD should be offered in exchange for their assistance in convincing the main PKK to return to negotiations. The US currently does not recognize the PYD as a terrorist organization, despite its extensive ties and subservience to the PKK. This could allow the group to act as an intermediary between Western governments and the terrorist group. It also provides a vulnerability to induce the PYD to end its authoritarian actions against political rivals in northern Syria.

The US and the West must also seek to assuage Turkish concerns over the PYD's control of much of its border. Turkey does not distinguish between the PKK and PYD, and the US must acknowledge Turkey's concerns, by voicing them loudly and forcefully to the PYD itself to dissuade rash behavior by the party. By arming the YPG and its allies, the United States may inadvertently fuel the PKK's insurgency within Turkey. To mitigate this, weapons should only be provided to the YPG when absolutely necessary, and any evidence of US-provided weapons in use by the PKK against Turkey should result in an immediate halt to the program and a detailed investigation; potential additional steps, similar to those previously mentioned, should be considered to punish the PYD/YPG for such transgressions. US support for Syrian Kurds cannot translate into incidental support for the PKK's main war against the Turkish state.

Conclusion

The PKK's insurgency has been fueled by the rapidly devolving political and security situation in the Middle East. Within Turkey, the group has been strengthened by the Turkish state's oppression against the Kurdish community and further emboldened by the deterioration of Turkish institutions at the hands of President Erdogan. In Iraq and Syria, the PKK and its branch organizations capitalized on the security vacuum to expand and secure territory, while using the existential threat of ISIL to forge alliances of convenience with those, including the United States and Western states, that would not have otherwise been possible. In the current situation, policymakers face a daunting challenge in dealing with the PKK. Success will require innovative thinking and a radical departure from current US policy.

ABOUT YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN FOREIGN POLICY (YPFP)

Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YPFP) is committed to fostering the next generation of foreign policy leaders by providing its members with the knowledge, skills, exposure, and relationships they will need to tackle critical global challenges over the course of their careers. YPFP is a dynamic, global, nonpartisan, non-profit organization with 10,000+ selected members around the world who work in all fields of international affairs. It was established in 2004, and is headquartered in Washington, DC, with branches in Brussels, London, and New York. YPFP is supported by around 150 volunteer staff members worldwide, for whom the leadership and management of a global NGO supplements their daytime careers or graduate studies.

ABOUT THE COMBATING TERRORISM WORKING GROUP (CTWG)

The Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG) reorganized in early 2017 from the Combating Terrorism Discussion Group in order to better facilitate the development of future counterterrorism leaders and policymakers. The central goals of the CTWG are to increase NextGen engagement through policy paper production, focused discussion meetings, and YPFP membership-wide events. The CTWG explores and assesses methods that the United States and our allies can use to effectively respond to and proactively prepare for emerging and evolving terrorist threats. The working group leverages cross-disciplinary approaches in order to define holistic solutions to fight terrorism. Follow the CTWG on [Twitter](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KEVIN TRUITTE

Kevin Truitte is a member of the Combating Terrorism Working Group and the chair of the Intelligence and Information Warfare Discussion Group with Young Professionals in Foreign Policy. He is currently a graduate student pursuing an MA in Security Studies at Georgetown University. Kevin previously worked as a Research Assistant at Hudson Institute, and has interned at the U.S.-Libya Business Association, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Institute for the Study of War, and from 2015-2016 ran a Libya-focused research blog, Libya Security Monitor. He holds an MA in Information Operations from Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security and a BA in Political Science and Islamic Civilization and Societies from Boston College.