

Analysis

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Summary: Last week's murder of three female activists from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the heart of Paris has added a dramatic new twist to Turkey's efforts to end the 28-year-long Kurdish conflict. As French police continue their investigation into the slayings, speculation about who was behind them continues with no clear answers in sight. This policy brief offers some suggestions for the masterminds and their motives.

Turkey and the Kurds: The Blood-Stained Path to Peace

by *Amberin Zaman*

Introduction

Last week's murder of three female activists from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the heart of Paris has added a dramatic new twist to Turkey's efforts to end the 28-year-long Kurdish conflict. Coming on the heels of the New Year announcement by Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that the National Intelligence (MİT) boss, Hakan Fidan, had resumed talks with the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the widespread consensus is that the killings were aimed at derailing Erdoğan's latest and arguably most determined effort at peace. Who stands to gain from the killings and can their goal be achieved?

The Victims

The principle target of the murders was almost certainly Sakine Cansız, a founding member of the PKK, whose resistance to savage and systematic torture during a decade of interment in the notorious Diyarbakir prison in the wake of the 1980 coup elevated her to hero status among millions of Kurds. After her release in 1991, Cansız joined PKK forces in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, where she commanded

thousands of female fighters and took part in executive committee decisions. Among a handful of militants who dared criticize Öcalan, she was also fiercely loyal to him and took part in the so-called Oslo talks between Turkey and the PKK, which collapsed in June 2010 amid mutual recriminations. The other victims were Fidan Doğan, 31, who represented a PKK-linked umbrella group called the Kurdistan National Congress, and Leyla Sönmez, 24, a newly inducted activist.

The Suspects

As French police continue their investigation into the slayings, speculation about who was behind them continues with no clear answers in sight. One theory, and one of the least probable given Erdoğan's successful campaign against the so-called deep state, is that remnants of this shadowy grouping of coup-plotting generals and like-minded allies who are bent on weakening his Justice and Development party (AKP) were behind the affair. Why risk exposure in a powerful EU member country with so many potential targets to pick from at home? Even more outlandish is the idea that the Turkish government's dirty tricks



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department was responsible. Why would Erdoğan set about sabotaging a process that he initiated? While rogue elements may well have plotted such mischief in the past, Turkey does not have a record of killing its opponents abroad. Moreover, with the exit of the overtly anti-Turkish former French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, Turkey and France have been working hard to repair their battered friendship.

So might this be a settling of internal scores among the rebels? The PKK has a history of executing dissenters and there has long existed a divide between hawks who favor continuing the war and doves, led by Öcalan's most trusted commander in the field, Murat Karayilan, who has long wanted to negotiate. But Cansız's popularity among the Kurds, as witnessed by the mass outpouring of grief over her death, cuts across ideological lines and if it were to emerge that hardliners were responsible, this would deal a big blow to their standing. Worse, it could even trigger an intra-PKK conflict. It is worth noting that Cemil Bayık, a top PKK commander who is counted among the hawks, declared his support for the new round of peace talks. Besides, given the French authorities' heightened scrutiny of PKK operations in recent months (partly to placate the Turks), the risks of carrying out such a high profile murder on French soil without being caught seem pretty high.

Another theory is that Cansız and her colleagues were murdered by PKK operatives with ties to a foreign government. The fact that they gained access to the Kurdish Information Center, where the crime was committed, without forcing its doors suggests that their victims knew the killers. And the professionalism with which they performed the job in one of Paris's busiest areas, using silencers, and walking away unnoticed, also suggests the involvement of a foreign intelligence service. Iran with its well-documented habit of bumping off political dissidents, particularly in Paris, has emerged as a possible culprit. As for its motives, they are fairly clear. Relations between Turkey and the Islamic Republic have been steadily deteriorating ever since Ankara approved the establishment of a U.S. manned NATO radar base in eastern Turkey, part of a so-called "missile defense shield." Relations took a sharp turn for the worse because of Turkey's overt support for rebels fighting to overthrow the Syrian president, Iran's closest regional ally, Bashar al-Assad. Viewed from Tehran, Turkey's push for regime

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change in Syria is a step away from Western plans to topple the Islamic republic's clerical order.

Hardly a day passes without one Iranian official or another publicly taking pot shots at Turkey. And whenever Iran wants to put pressure on Turkey, it turns to the PKK. Throughout the 1990s, PKK fighters, including Bayık, who has kidney trouble, were known to receive medical treatment in the Iranian city of Urumiyeh and allowed to use Iran as a launching pad for attacks against Turkish security forces. The alliance crumbled after the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the establishment of the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), the Iranian wing of the PKK, which turned its guns on Iran.

This propelled Iran and Turkey into robust cooperation against their mutual enemy, with both countries exchanging intelligence and PKK/PJAK captives, and staging cross border aerial attacks against PKK/PJAK bases in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. But in 2011, a deal was struck between Iran and the PKK. PJAK forces were pulled away from the Iranian border. And the PKK toned down its salvos against Iran. When the rebels staged a series of sensational attacks around the southeastern township of Şemdinli last year, holding large swathes of territory, for the first time there was widespread speculation that some of them were crossing in from Iran. At the same time, any agreement with the PKK may well encompass its sister organization in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD has been expanding its influence in Syria ever since Assad ceded control of a string of Kurdish-dominated towns along the Turkish border. If the PYD were to get off the fence and join forces with the Syrian opposition at Öcalan's bidding, this would surely hasten Assad's fall. Needless to say, in order for this to happen, Turkey would



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need to declare its support for the cultural and political rights of Syria's Kurds.

Looking beyond the clash of interests over Syria if Turkey were to make peace with its own Kurds, having done so with those in Iraq — trade ties are booming and Turkey has started importing oil from Iraqi Kurdistan in defiance of warnings from Baghdad that its actions will precipitate a break up of Iraq — this can only increase pressure on Iran to accommodate its own long-repressed Kurdish minority.

Yet, it also true that Iran is a favorite scapegoat for all manner of terrorist plots. One could argue that bogged down in its own troubles, including the forthcoming presidential elections, it lacks the resources and energy to hatch such plans. Indeed, there is no evidence to date connecting Iran to the Paris murders. And assuming it were, as noted above, it would have used PKK militants to do the job, making it impossible to prove its complicity.

The Goal

If the purpose of the slayings was to disrupt the peace process, it has had the opposite effect. Erdoğan avoided pointing the finger of blame at the PKK leadership and declared that he was determined to see the peace process through to its end. Bülent Arınç, a deputy prime minister, went as far as to lament the deaths. Likewise, the PKK and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) have refrained from accusing the government. They suggested that “the Turkish Gladio (deep state) acting in concert with “foreign powers” might have been responsible and vowed to stick with the talks.

Cynics claim that Erdoğan's engagement with Öcalan is calculated to buy calm ahead of municipal and presidential elections that are to be held next year. The risk of a further escalation of PKK violence and an increase in army casualties could indeed mar Erdoğan's chances of fulfilling his dream of becoming Turkey's first popularly elected president. His dramatic shift away from fiercely nationalist rhetoric and pledges to crush the PKK by force may also stem from the realization that his potential opponent and the current incumbent, Abdullah Gül, might seize the reformist mantle and rally disenchanted liberals and pious Kurds around his campaign. Either way, Erdoğan has taken

a big risk and has every incentive to push through a deal. The leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has said he will support the prime minister's efforts. Even Fethullah Gülen, Turkey's most influential Muslim cleric, delivered his blessings from self-imposed exile in the United States. And the generals who have long been blamed for blocking previous peace initiatives have not uttered a peep. If anything, the Paris murders demonstrate that those who stand to lose from peace take Erdoğan the most seriously of all.

About the Author

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