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Turkey, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement: A Chronology

Turkey’s decades-long struggle with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Kurdish acronym PKK) has fostered both cooperation and contention between the United States and Turkey. Since 2015, the United States has partnered with militias that include the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (Kurdish acronym YPG) against the Islamic State. Turkish operations in northern Syria against the YPG, including an incursion launched in the fall of 2019, are perhaps the most prominent recent example of how the Turkey-PKK conflict can complicate U.S. regional policy and bilateral relations with Turkey.

The PKK, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, represents one among many strands of organized political and military activity in the name of Kurdish nationalism. For more information on Kurdish groups in the Middle East, see CRS In Focus IF10350, *The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

PKK Origins (1978-1983)

The early Turkish Republic (founded in 1923) saw several Kurdish-led rebellions and uprisings, leading the Turkish state to generally repress Kurdish ethnic identity and political aspirations. In this context, Abdullah Ocalan (born about 1947 in southeastern Turkey’s Sanliurfa Province) and other Kurdish activists founded the PKK in Turkey in the late 1970s as a Marxist-Leninist organization dedicated to an independent Kurdistan. Ocalan built networks that allowed PKK militants to train with Palestinian groups in Syria and Lebanon and base operations from camps in semi-autonomous Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

- 1978** Abdullah Ocalan and others establish the PKK.
- 1979** Ocalan arrives in **Syria** to lead the PKK from exile.
- 1980** **Military coup** in Turkey; general post-coup crackdown on political opposition, including Kurds.
- 1982** During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran persuades Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani to allow the PKK to establish **camps in northern Iraq**.
PKK also establishes camps in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley with the support of Syria.

Conflict Begins, Gulf War, and Initial U.S. Terrorist Designation (1984-1998)

In 1984, with Ocalan based in Syria, the PKK launched an armed insurgency in Turkey. Using guerilla tactics, the PKK primarily targeted Turkish military and other state officials in largely Kurdish-populated southeastern Turkey. The group also sought to supplant the traditional Kurdish ruling class by attacking state-aligned “collaborationists.” The PKK insurgency reached its height in the mid-1990s; fighting since 1984 has killed thousands of PKK fighters,

Turkish security forces, and civilians. After the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK entrenched itself further in northern Iraq, prompting periodic Turkish military action.

- 1984** PKK begins **armed insurgency** in Turkey, eliciting Turkish government response and tightened security in southeastern Turkey.
- 1985** Turkey establishes the **Village Guards**, a Kurdish paramilitary group to counter the PKK.
- 1987** KDP leader Barzani cuts ties with the PKK; PKK continues to use camps in northern Iraq and receives permission for some limited use of Iranian territory. Turkey declares **state of emergency** in southeast.
- 1991** After the **Gulf War**, an Iraqi Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein is brutally suppressed by Iraqi forces, prompting mass refugee flows to Turkey and Iran; the United States and others provide relief from Turkey, establish a no-fly zone to encourage refugees’ return.
- 1993** Fragile two-month ceasefire breaks and conflict intensifies in southeastern Turkey.
- 1994** U.S. Congress enacts legislation withholding **military loans** to Turkey until the executive branch submits a report on alleged human rights violations related to Turkey-PKK violence.
- 1997** Turkey lifts state of emergency in three provinces. State Department designates the PKK as a **Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)**.
Turkish forces enter northern Iraq to support Barzani against his PKK-supported Iraqi Kurdish rivals.
- 1998** Facing Turkish military threats and other pressure, Syrian President Hafez al Asad expels Ocalan and closes PKK camps in line with the **Adana Protocol**.

Ocalan’s Capture, 2nd Iraq War, and Renewed Conflict (1999-2008)

Turkish authorities captured and imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, ending one phase of Turkey-PKK conflict. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) received formal autonomy. In 2004, the PKK restarted its insurgency, relying largely on the camps it had established in the 1980s in what had become KRG-controlled areas of northern Iraq. In response, Turkey increased its operations in Iraq and threatened a larger intervention until the United States began providing support for Turkish operations against the PKK in Iraq.

- 1999** After seeking asylum in a number of countries, Ocalan is **captured in Kenya** by Turkish special forces; after a trial he is sentenced to death.

	Ocalan, in prison, calls for PKK to declare a ceasefire and pull out of Turkey; PKK largely obeys.
2001	State Department designates PKK as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224.
2002	Ocalan's death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment when Turkey abolishes the death penalty; Ocalan continues to exercise control over the PKK, which briefly disavows violence. State of emergency lifted in last southeast provinces.
2003	U.S. invasion of Iraq. PYD (Democratic Union Party) is founded as PKK's political offshoot in Syria.
2004	PKK abandons ceasefire and insurgency resumes.
2005	Ocalan abandons call for independent Kurdish state and calls for Kurds to pursue " democratic confederalism " in their respective countries.
2007	The United States helps prevent a major Turkish cross-border intervention in Iraq by agreeing to share intelligence to help Turkey target PKK installations in mountainous areas of northern Iraq.
2008	President Bush designates the PKK as Significant Foreign Narcotics Trafficker .
Peace Process and PYD/YPG Ascent in Syria (2009-2014)	
Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who came to office in 2003 expressing some openness to greater freedoms for expressions of Kurdish identity, initiated a "solution process" that provided some rights for Turkish Kurds and raised hopes for a larger Turkey-PKK settlement. The war in Syria and the rise of both the Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL) and the PKK-linked YPG added new challenges to U.S.-Turkey relations.	
2009	Turkey declares beginning of "Solution Process."
2010	Broadcasting and education in Kurdish allowed.
2011	Syria conflict begins.
2012	Erdogan reveals secret government talks with Ocalan. Syrian regime forces withdraw from most Kurdish-majority areas, effectively ceding control to the PYD and its YPG militias , which establish supremacy over the Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council. Turkish government begins talks with PYD leaders (lasting until Turkey-PKK peace process breaks down in 2015) in effort to distance PYD/YPG from PKK.
2014	YPG and PKK aid Iraqi Kurdish <i>peshmerga</i> in Iraq's Sinjar against Islamic State ; <i>peshmerga</i> gain Erdogan's approval to transit through Turkey to aid YPG in IS-besieged Syrian border town of Kobane . U.S. air operations against the Islamic State indirectly help anti-IS forces, including the YPG, drive IS fighters from Kobane.

U.S.-YPG Cooperation and Turkish Military Action (2015-present)

The Turkey-PKK peace process broke down in August 2015 after IS terrorist attacks in Turkey targeting Kurds. Soon thereafter, the YPG became the main U.S. counter-IS ground force partner in Syria (as the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF), receiving U.S. training and, since 2017, arms. Since 2018, amid debate about how to continue countering the Islamic State, Turkey launched two major incursions against the YPG in Syria, contributing to a major crisis in U.S.-Turkey relations in 2019. Turkish cross-border operations against PKK targets in northern Iraq continue despite concerns voiced by Iraqi government and KRG officials.

2015	With U.S. and coalition support, PYD/YPG and affiliated non-Kurdish militias (collectively known as the SDF) start reversing IS gains in northern Syria and establishing governing councils in areas they occupy. Turkey's Kurdish nationalist political party achieves unprecedented success in parliamentary elections. IS terrorist attacks target Kurds in Turkey. Turkey-PKK clashes resume, especially in southeastern urban areas.
2016	Turkish authorities reestablish control in southeast but significant human rights concerns persist. Turkey, working with Syrian rebel partners, launches its first major ground campaign in Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield) against IS-held territory, though it also aims to prevent further gains by SDF forces.
2017	U.S. decides to directly arm YPG in advance of Raqqa campaign, promising it will recover YPG arms after the Islamic State's defeat.
2018	Turkish-led forces push Kurdish-led forces (different from those connected with the U.S. military) out of Afrin, Syria in Operation Olive Branch ; some counter-IS operations stop because of the diversion of some SDF personnel to assist in Afrin. State Department announces rewards for help leading to the capture of three senior PKK leaders.
2019	U.S. troops near the Turkey-Syria border are repositioned and Turkey launches Operation Peace Spring to push YPG forces from the border area. Turkey arranges with the United States and Russia for the removal of YPG forces from "safe zones." U.S.-SDF partnership continues outside of safe zones.

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