

The PKK story: 'Blood and Belief'

Tuesday 4 December 2007, by [Sahin Alpay](#)

Aliza Marcus's new book, "The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence: Blood and Belief" (New York University Press, September 2007), is the best and most recent study on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It is an extremely valuable contribution to a proper understanding of the PKK phenomenon.

Marcus was based in Turkey between 1989 and 1996, first as a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor and later for Reuters, and she won a National Press Club Award for her coverage of the PKK. She began her study of the organization following the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, its leader, in 1999. The book is based on nearly 100 in-depth interviews, primarily with former high-ranking PKK members who have left the organization and sought asylum in Europe, but also with PKK sympathizers and opponents.

One of the most revealing aspects of the study is the assessments made by some of the former commanders of the PKK about Öcalan, the organization's founder. According to their accounts, Öcalan's basic aim was to establish his absolute authority over the PKK and the organization's unrivaled authority in the Kurdish movement. For fear of losing control he did not tolerate any kind of dissent within the organization and did not allow any Kurdish movement outside the PKK to assume initiative or gain influence. To this end he killed or otherwise removed all who disagreed with him.

Öcalan's absolute authority

Many leading cadres within the PKK arrived at the conclusion that Öcalan was nothing more than a narcissistic, psychotic, and paranoid dictator, and that the main problem of the PKK was its own leader.

Another instructive aspect of the book is the information it provides about how the states in the region have used the PKK against each other and against other Kurdish movements. Syria, which harbored Öcalan from 1979 to 1998, supported the PKK against Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish movement led by Massoud Barzani, on the condition that it did not stage its attacks from Syrian territory. Damascus also used the PKK to direct elsewhere the attention of its own Kurds, some of whom are denied even citizenship. Between 1987 and 1999 Tehran allowed the PKK to establish itself on Iranian soil, on the condition that it did not stage its operations against Turkey from there. The PKK in return provided the Iranians with intelligence on the Turkish army and the peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdish) forces.

Following the US invasion of Iraq, the PKK formed a sister organization called the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which initiated attacks against Iran. US authorities, contrary to reports in the media, deny any involvement with PJAK. The Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, beginning in the late 1980s, allowed the PKK to operate freely against the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey in return for intelligence on the peshmerga forces and the Turkish army. Greece (like the European countries in general) turned a blind eye to the PKK's recruitment, political training and propaganda activities as long as it was not involved with violence in the country.

Lawyers' case

The book describes how Öcalan has managed to continue to run the PKK even after his capture through directions sent via his lawyers, who visit him regularly on the island where he is imprisoned. It mentions that on one occasion Öcalan demanded from his lawyers the phone numbers of certain misbehaving Kurds.

But it does not address the allegations about Öcalan's relations with Turkish intelligence.

Widespread conspiracy theories among Kurdish intellectuals opposed to the PKK maintain that it has been created and manipulated by the "deep state" in Turkey to discredit and delegitimize demands for the recognition of Kurdish identity by affiliating these with violence and terrorism. I do not take these "theories" seriously, but I do agree with the notion that the PKK has caused the greatest damage to Turkey's Kurds. The book also responds to the question of how someone like Öcalan, who upon his capture declared that he was "ready to serve the state" and that "his mother was Turkish," is still able to command significant support among Turkey's Kurds. The answer is that the suppression of Kurdish identity has forced many Kurds to choose between the state and the PKK. Lacking alternatives, many have turned to the latter. "Blood and Belief" must be published in Turkish as soon as possible.

Sources

Source : TdZ, 26/11/2007