

Michael M. Gunter

“Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence”

Middle East Policy

Bahar 2008

“Geçmişte PKK hakkında yaptığı haberlere dayanan detaylı bilgisi de hesaba katıldığında, Marcus’un analizinin kesinlikle nesnel olduğunu görüyoruz.”

...

“Marcus bize, kaynakçası, dizini ve pek çok ilginç fotoğrafla tamamladığı, mükemmel, nesnel ve zevkle okunan bir PKK öyküsü sunuyor. Bu kitap, politika yapanlar, akademisyenler ve bu örgütü tanımak isteyen herkes için bir temel eser.”

Formally established on November 27,1978, but with immediate roots dating back several years earlier, the Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan (PKK), or Kurdistan Workers party, led by Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan long labored in relative obscurity as far as the United States was concerned. No longer, however. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the PKK camps in northern Iraq have become an increasingly important issue for the United States. Turkey has repeatedly threatened large-scale military intervention into northern Iraq to root them out if the United States, Iraq or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq refuse to do so. If such intervention were to occur, it would not only threaten the relative stability of the KRQ but might even result in disastrous U.S.-Turkish clashes.

However, the United States, battling the insurgency to the south, is in no position to go after the PKK, ensconced in its mountainous retreats. Indeed, retired U.S. General Joseph Ralston has been serving since August 2006 as the U.S. "Special Envoy [to Turkey] Countering the PKK." His mission seems to be to placate Turkey with largely meaningless verbal assurances in order to forestall Turkish intervention. The issue of the PKK sanctuaries even became involved in the July 22,2007, Turkish parliamentary elections. Accordingly, Aliza Marcus's reader-friendly, but detailed, study of the PKK will be welcomed by both policy makers and scholars.

As a journalist reporting on the PKK in the early 1990s, Marcus had run afoul of Turkey's stringent security laws for an article she published in November 1994 on the government's torching of Kurdish villages during its anti-PKK campaign. Her present book is not the first dealing solely with the PKK. More than a half a decade ago, Paul White published a solid analysis, *Primitive Rebels Or Revolutionary Modernizers? The Turkish National Movement in Turkey* (Zed Books, 2000), which largely dealt with the PKK. More recently, Ali Kemal Ozean published a detailed theoretical analysis, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan* (Routledge, 2006), while Kevin McKiernan's journalistic account, *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland* (St. Martin's Press, 2006), also dealt in part with the PKK. David Romano's recent sophisticated study, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) also contains some significant analysis of the PKK, while Denise Natali's equally sophisticated work, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2005), has little. Of all these recent studies, Marcus only lists the White book in her bibliography, which also omits several other earlier works in English that had previously dealt with the PKK. The inevitable time lag between final revisions and publication probably explains some of these omissions. Certainly, Marcus now gives us the most thorough and readable account of the rise of the PKK and its charismatic leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

The author bases her analysis on detailed interviews with very knowledgeable former PKK members, most now living in European exile. She also "incorporates information from a variety of [other] sources, including interviews with well-known Kurdish opponents of the PKK, independent Turkish and Kurdish activists, and foreign sources with knowledge" (p. vii). Her analysis is particularly objective, given her own thorough knowledge of events based on her years of earlier reporting on the PKK.

Marcus divides her study into four parts, the first dealing with the origins of the PKK. "Ocalan's supporters would make much of the fact that he came from as depressed surroundings as his followers, unlike many of the earlier leading Kurdish figures, who often were linked to large tribal or wealthy landowning families" (p. 15). He literally "came out of nowhere" (p. 30). On the other hand, Marcus also adds that "what is missed is that many of

the early supporters were actually those who had lifted themselves out of their poverty-stricken, uneducated 'lumpen' surroundings" (p. 37). After a brief stint working in a Turkish government office in Diyarbakir and then Istanbul (measuring land deeds), Ocalan "enrolled in the prestigious political science department of Ankara University" (p. 23). "The state's own assimilationist policies had in some cases awakened exactly what it was trying to wipe out" (p. 26). "Being arrested for joining a peaceful demonstration convinced Ocalan there was little room to act in Turkey's democracy ... [and] that armed revolution was the only answer" (p. 25). "The negative reaction of the Turkish leftists to his ideas helped convince Ocalan that there was no point in continuing to look for a Turkish partner" (p. 28). Ocalan also argued that the "fatal flaw" of the other Kurdish leaders was that they "always remained part of feudal Kurdish society" (p. 34). Thus, these other Kurdish "leaders were not true Kurdish revolutionaries....While rivals accused Ocalan of hate-mongering, some Kurds saw in his stance a certain independence that made them think he could be the one to lead them to their own state" (p. 35). Citing one of Ocalan's earlier associates, Marcus writes how "the 1920s were our model, how the Russian Communist party forbade all other parties and got rid of the cliques. We saw this as all positive and we wanted to do the same" (p. 42).

In the summer of 1979, more than a year before the military coup of September 1980, Ocalan secretly left Turkey for Syria, where he remained for almost 20 years. It proved to be a fortuitous move, enabling him to avoid being captured with most of the other Turkish and Kurdish militants when the military seized power. In Syria, Ocalan eventually made useful contacts. As one former associate explained: "From the Palestinians we learned things. We learned about making demonstrations for martyrs, about ceremonies. We did a lot of reading on a people's war; we also had armed training. They gave us clothing, cigarettes. We owe the Palestinians something" (p. 58). Soon the PKK had the Helwe Camp (later called the Mahsun Korkmaz Camp) in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP) also allowed the PKK to build a base in northern Iraq. "In Lebanon they learned how to make bombs and throw grenades, but in northern Iraq they would learn how to survive in the mountains as a guerrilla force" (p. 71). In the early 1980s, the PKK sent survey teams into southeastern Turkey to map out the terrain and finally caught Turkey by surprise when it launched its guerrilla struggle in August 1984.

Part II deals with the consolidation of the PKK's power. In practice, this meant Ocalan's consolidation of absolute authority over the organization. Indeed, at times, Marcus's major theme appears to be "Ocalan's cult of personality" (p. 210), "narcissism" (p. 266) and sheer "paranoia" (p. 135). He "always was concerned about challenges to his authority and to the unity of the PKK under his authority" (p. 90). "Between 1983 and 1985, Ocalan ordered or encouraged the murder of at least 11 high-level former or current PKK members" (p. 94). "At least 24, perhaps closer to 50 or 100, new recruits were executed in 1989 and 1990 on suspicion of being real or potential traitors" (p. 135). Sometimes Ocalan even blamed others for these murders and then executed the perpetrator. Referring to himself as "the 'Party Leadership,'... Ocalan... applied, manipulated, ignored and changed everything at will" (p. 144). He even "began to believe that the PKK's actions were behind many world events ... [and] saw himself as the center of world events" (p. 266). To protect his position, Ocalan also opposed broader Kurdish unity. "The development of a politically experienced Kurdish class was hobbled" (p. 163). Reading this, one cannot help but be reminded of Stalin's tactics and wonder how the PKK ever became so powerful.

In the third part of her book, Marcus analyzes the PKK's serious attempt to win control of southeastern Turkey in the early 1990s. She explains that Ocalan also could be "politically savvy and reasonable" (p. 211). He had a "relatively strong grasp of the need for political changes, underscoring the very practical, ideological elasticity that had helped the PKK survive and grow so successfully over the years" (p. 244). Although at times he had a "coarse, patronizing and even threatening way of talking ... [it] could be tempered by a vigorous defense of the Kurdish struggle" (p. 157). "Thousands of other young Kurdish men and women began to throw their support behind the groups, helping turn the PKK into a mass organization" (p. 160). The PKK's pursuit of a relentless guerrilla war won it mass trust and respect, while its decision also to move into legal, nonviolent activities gave it a much longer reach. Marcus refers to this mass civilian support as the "milis" (p. 154), although it was more commonly referred to as the Kurdistan National Liberation Front (ERNK). "It helped that the PKK was the only Kurdish nationalist organization fighting the Turkish state, making it hard for Kurdish nationalists to ignore it and still be active" (p. 217). The Serhildan (people's uprising) that occurred in the spring of 1990 even had the possibility of becoming "something like the Palestinian intifada" (p. 180). Weapons proved easy to obtain: "After

U.S.-led Coalition Forces established a safe haven in north Iraq [in 1991], huge stocks of old Iraqi army weaponry and equipment were there for the taking" (p. 186). "The Turkish military clearly was on the defensive" (p. 219).

The PKK's success, however, "assumed a static situation, one in which the Turkish army did not learn from its mistakes and Ocalan did not make any" (p. 181). In May 1993, the Turkish military began to change its overall counterinsurgency tactics by burning villages that had supplied the PKK and resorting to the clandestine murder of civilian Kurdish activists. "Everyone spoke of the same problems, not enough supplies, no contact with the local people, constant attack by [pro-government Kurdish] village guards" (p. 240). Ocalan proved incapable, or maybe unwilling, to react. Indeed, he "may have spoken against a mass uprising because he feared that it would remove the Kurdish fight out of his control" (p. 181). "When [PKK] commanders raised the problem of the forcible evacuation of Kurdish villagers, Ocalan exhorted them to press the villagers to return. But PKK rebels could barely protect themselves any more, let alone unarmed civilians" (p. 241). "To the extent that mistakes had been made, Ocalan stressed, they were made by rebels who were too weak or too cowardly to properly

The fourth and final part of this book deals with Ocalan's capture in February 1999 and subsequent events. This section is not as thorough as the previous three. Marcus could have said more about why Ocalan was finally expelled from Syria, the rise of the new legal Kurdish parties (HADEP and then the DTP), and how in her own words "the PKK survives" (p. 305) despite seeming "empty, bereft of a focus" (p. 299). She correctly argues that "Ocalan in captivity became a symbol of the Kurdish nation - oppressed, imprisoned, used and then discarded by nations with other interests at heart" (p. 280). She also concludes that "the PKK survives because it is popular among Kurds in Turkey. It is popular because it fought for so long, and the PKK's fight tied people to the party and gained it Kurdish respect" (p. 305). The PKK also remains because "the state's fundamental approach did not change: In front of every, even limited, reform, the state put obstacles to slow down implementation" (p. 293). "The Kurdish problem will remain because the answer lies in Turkey opening a real dialogue with Kurds, and taking it from there" (p. 304).

Despite her detailed interviews to gain insights into the workings of the PKK, Marcus apparently never met Ocalan himself. In addition, she interviewed few if any of his top political associates, such as Cernii Bayik, Duran Kalkan, Murat Karayilan (who currently heads the PKK guerrillas in northern Iraq's Kandil Mountains), Halil Atac, Mustafa Karasu and Ali Haydar Kaytan. She does not even mention that Kani Yilmaz, once considered possibly the PKK's number three in command, was expelled from the organization after Ocalan's capture and eventually assassinated in northern Iraq. Although she gives an excellent analysis of his falling out with Ocalan and eventual capture by the Turks, Marcus never even mentions the well-known nickname of the legendary PKK military commander Semdin Sakik, aka Parmaksiz Zeki (Fingerless, having had a thumb blown off while firing a missile). For some reason, she also writes about "Iraqi Kurdistan, as it is now called" (p. 301), instead of using its current, universally known name, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

But this is petty carping. Marcus has given us an excellent, objective and most readable account of the PKK, complete with a bibliography, an index, and numerous interesting photos. Her book will be must reading for policy makers, scholars, and lay persons interested in this still-important organization.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa5400/is_/ai_n25418440