The PKK and Kurdish Drug Networks: Cooperation, Convergence or Conflict

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The PKK and the KDNs: Cooperation, Convergence or Conflict?
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Abstract
This paper investigates the evolving inter-relationship between the PKK and Kurdish Drug Networks (KDNs). To understand the nature of the interaction between these differently motivated organizations, the investigators examined the documented statements of drug investigators, PKK operatives and convicted drug criminals. The PKK-KDN interaction was selected as a case study because it provides important insights into much the broader and highly controversial issue concerning the relationship between criminal and terrorist organizations. The research presented here suggests that the PKK initially developed ad hoc cooperation with various KDNs. From the start, however, such cooperation was asymmetric and involved a high degree of coercion by the PKK. Moreover, the cooperation never scaled up to the point of convergence or amalgamation. On the contrary, after the PKK gained substantial experience in the drug business PKK-KDN relations were increasingly characterized by competition. The PKK created extensive sub-structures to run its drug business and then sought to monopolize the whole cycle of the drug trade. As a result the PKK and KDNs became engulfed in fierce turf battles. In other words, the PKK-KDN case exhibited dynamics very different from the popular worst-case scenarios in which criminal and terrorist networks find common cause, augment their capacity for harm through the development of synergistic relationships, and create an unholy alliance or even an amalgamation of different networks. The relationships described in this analysis were coercive and exploitive rather than willing and reciprocal. Moreover, they increasingly became hostile and violent.

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Introduction

The relationship between criminal and terrorist organizations has attracted increasing attention among students of both international security and criminology. It is widely accepted that both transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and terrorist networks pose significant –if somewhat different - challenges to international security in the post Cold War world. Many scholars also agree that these two phenomena are interrelated. The precise nature of this relationship, however, is a matter of dispute rather than consensus.

The starting point for most observers of criminal and terrorist networks is that they have very different objectives: terrorist organizations are ideologically driven and seek political change, whereas criminal networks are motivated by profit. If there is broad agreement on this starting point, however, there are nevertheless substantial differences of interpretation and sharp differences in threat assessment stemming from divergent views of its importance. One group of scholars contends that although terrorist and criminal organizations operate in the same subterranean world and have similar structures and similar risk management needs, the divergence of objectives – and along with this a divergence of organizational essence and identity- is an important inhibition (although not necessarily a prohibition) on efforts to collaborate and cooperate. Even though there are ad hoc instances of cooperation between criminal and terrorist networks, this is less important than terrorist appropriation of criminal methods. In these instances, terrorist organizations develop substructures and competencies to manage organized crime activities such as the smuggling of drugs, weapons and humans.

Another group argues that the differences of objective are less important than similar operational needs and a common interest in combating law enforcement and intelligence agencies. For these scholars, intense cooperation and even symbiosis between criminal networks and terrorist organizations is natural and inevitable. Indeed, from this perspective, the two types of networks sometimes even converge to form a kind of hybrid organization as in the cases of FARC and the Indian criminal organization known as D-Company and led by Daewood Ibrahim. Critics argue that cases of convergence are rare and largely unsubstantiated – especially when the focus is exclusively on terrorist organizations rather than insurgencies, where the dynamics are somewhat different.

The nexus of terrorism and drugs remains an under-investigated issue in Turkish security literature. In an attempt to fill this gap and contribute to the broader debate over the relationship between terrorist and criminal networks, this paper provides an in-depth
case study, which explores the evolution of the relationship between the PKK and Kurdish Drug Networks (KDNs). It attempts to address three major questions:

- How does the PKK interact with criminal organizations?
- How does the PKK specialize in various stages of drug business?
- What do the interactions of the PKK and the KDNs tell us about the broader relationship between criminal and terrorist networks?

The paper makes use of statements of PKK operatives, testimony of members of criminal organizations, case reports of law enforcement agencies, statements of counternarcotics and counterterrorism investigators, and institutional reports of various international law enforcement agencies, especially the Department of Anti-Smuggling and Organized Crime (KOM) in Turkey.

The analysis initially focuses on the broader debate about the relationship between criminal and terrorist organizations. It then looks at the evolving relationship between the PKK and KDNs and suggests that this relationship was never really one of reciprocity and freely given cooperation; rather it was one of asymmetry and coercion. It was also one in which the PKK learned how lucrative the drug business could be. As a result the PKK became more directly involved in various facets of the trafficking business. The dimensions of this involvement are fully explored. The concluding section of the paper suggests that while the pattern of relationships identified in the analysis has parallels elsewhere it is not necessarily a universal model. It also argues that although the drug business was highly lucrative for the PKK it did not come without certain costs and risks.

The Broader Debate

As suggested above, transnational crime and terrorism are two conceptually different but operationally interlocking security phenomena. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a blossoming, although highly disparate literature on what is sometimes termed the crime-terror nexus. The term narco-terrorism has also become popular even though it can be argued that it has little analytical – as opposed to political and rhetorical - utility. One group of analysts claims that the interaction between the two underground networks is predominantly cooperative and ranges from strategic alliance to symbiosis and/or convergence. While these scholars maintain that there is a symbiotic interrelationship and

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4 Here, we do not argue that all drugs in Turkey are trafficked by the KDN or PKK. This paper selected these two networks as a case study to understand the dynamics of the crime-terror relationship.
likely convergence between the two underground networks, other scholars are skeptical of a symbiosis of the two such differently motivated actors. In this latter view, the connections between terrorist and criminal networks are typically exaggerated and largely unsubstantiated. Even though these two types of network may cooperate in various circumstances, they are unlikely to merge into a single body owing to the stark contrast in their agendas.

According to the first group of analysts, mutual interests facilitate cooperation and even partnership between terror networks and transnational criminal organizations, making both a more formidable challenge to security. Ehrenfeld (1990), for example, has maintained that, “when the two combine, terrorist organizations derive benefits from the drug trade with no loss of status, and drug traffickers who have forged an alliance with terrorists became more formidable and gain in political clout” (p.xix). Similarly, Laqueur (1999) noted that intensified interaction between criminal organizations and terror networks had ushered in a new era of symbiosis. For him, the connection is stronger than it has ever been. Others suggest that this partnership sometimes leads to convergence and the emergence of hybrid organizations (Makarenko 2004, Ehrenfeld 1990, Bovernkerk and Chakra 2004).

Tamara Makarenko (2004) elaborated one of the more sophisticated and useful frameworks for analyzing the relationship between criminal and terrorist networks. In her oft-cited article “The Crime-Terror continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Crime and Terrorism,” Makarenko identified four different levels or forms of interaction in what she termed the terror-crime continuum: (i) alliance, (ii) operational motivations, (iii) convergence and (iv) black hole. Alliance indicates the least developed interaction between criminals and terrorists. Mutual interests might propel the development of short or long-term alliance in order to exchange knowledge or operational support. Both organizations benefit from such an alliance, albeit in different ways. Terrorists acquire profits, skills and access to underground markets, whereas the criminal networks benefit from protection and the political instability created by terrorist organizations. The second dimension, operational motivations, refers to “criminal groups using terrorism as an operational tool and terrorist groups taking part in criminal activities…” (p.133). In this model, transnational criminal organizations might engage in political ventures to create a fertile ground for criminal initiatives. On the flipside, the terror networks might involve themselves in criminal activities to provide financial resources for a prolonged terror campaign. The core of Makarenko’s analysis, however, emphasizes the convergence of terrorist networks and transnational criminal organizations into single composite entities.
with hybrid characteristics. At the convergence point, Makarenko argues, “the ultimate aims and motivations of the organization have actually changed. In these cases, the groups no longer retain the defining points that had hitherto made them a political or criminal group” (p.135). Another level of interaction takes place in black holes - weak or failed states such as Afghanistan or Iraq where both criminal organizations and terrorists flourish. In such circumstances, both types of organization enjoy enormous influence taking advantage of systematic and prevailing corruption as well as feeble enforcement of law.

Makarenko’s analysis remains one of the most serious efforts to provide a framework of analysis and has been widely adopted. This is understandable: there are certainly cases that appear to validate her arguments. In Iraq, for example, kidnapping gangs interested in profit not politics sold hostages to terrorist organizations, which sometimes ransomed and sometimes beheaded them (Williams 2008). Moreover, there are many examples of what one of the authors of this paper has termed “do-it-yourself organized crime” conducted by terrorist organizations (Williams, 2008b).

For all its insights, however, there are problems with some of this analysis. One difficulty, for example, is that the continuum delineated by Makarenko covers both the adoption of certain kinds of activities and the connections between entities – even though these are very different phenomena. Another is that the potential for cooperation is exaggerated while the inhibitors are largely downplayed. Indeed, a second group of observers contends that symbiotic relationships between criminal and terror networks have been unduly overstated and that although there have been a few cases of convergence these are the exception rather than the rule. (Williams, 2007; Schmid, 2004; Naylor, 2002). Mark Galeotti, for example, maintains, “fears of international alliances between the terrorists and criminals have proven to be exaggerated” (quoted in Schmid 2004, p.203). Thomas Naylor (2002) goes even further, claiming that “at the end of their cooperation two groups usually end up opposite sides of the barricades” (p.56-57). In his view, cooperation between criminal groups and terrorist organizations cannot be long standing since the motivations of both organizations ultimately pull them apart. Similarly, Williams (2007) argues that divergent purposes and goals ultimately make it difficult for cooperation to be sustained let alone for convergence to occur. For him, “organized crime is, in essence a continuation of business by criminal means, while terrorism is the continuation of politics through the use of indiscriminate violence by non-state actors” (p.195). In a similar fashion, a study of the Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies (ITAC), (2006) concluded that the
convergence of terrorist organizations and organized crime groups is unlikely due to divergence of fundamental motivations.

According to Williams and Savona (1995) terrorist organizations can engage in organized crime activities through structural transformation rather than converging with criminal enterprises. Williams subsequently termed this “do-it-yourself” organized crime and concluded that this appropriation of methods was often more important than cooperative linkages. Thachuc (2001) enunciated a similar vision asserting that “many of today’s terrorist groups have not only lost some of their more comprehensible ideals, but are increasingly turning to smuggling and other criminal activities to fund their operations” (p.51). According to Dishman (2001), some terrorist organizations are progressively involved in drug trafficking through a readjustment process that includes the establishment of substructures for underground criminal activities. Structural transformation does not necessarily mean the ultimate metamorphosis of the terrorist organization, although sometimes – as with D-Company in India - this can occur, resulting in the kind of convergence Makarenko outlines. In many cases, however, terrorist organizations establish covert cells to deal with the financial transactions including drug trafficking, while maintaining the primacy of their political goals. Criminal activities are simply a means to fund the cause, which remains paramount rather than being subordinated to the desire for profit.

At the end of the day, both sets of arguments have merit. The criminal and terrorist worlds are highly complex and populated by a wide variety of groups. Consequently, relationships and interactions are inevitably highly diverse. At the same time, there is insufficient reliance on solid empirical data. In many cases analysts depend on information that has been collected through media content analysis. There is an enormous need for first hand data collected through interviewing terrorists, criminals, and investigators. Indeed, given the nature of the research topic, there is a surprising lack of in-depth case studies. Analysts try to convince the readers through presenting various examples from different countries. They do not present sound evidence of how terrorist organizations conduct organized crimes to finance their activities. Third, existing studies over-generalize the drug-terror continuum. Different terror organizations might have different strategies and modus operandi throughout their interaction with criminals. As a result, analysts should avoid broad generalizations to define the interaction between the two separate and distinct kinds of actor in the underground world.

Against this background, this paper fills an important gap in the literature in three respects. First, it uses both first hand and secondary data to analyze statements of PKK
members, drug criminals and narcotics investigators. Second, it provides an in-depth case study that investigates the specific interactions between the PKK and Kurdish drug networks and examines how this has evolved over time. Third, contrary to Tamara Makarenko’s linear crime-terror continuum model, the model hypothesizes that the interaction between the PKK and KDNs follows an inverted U shape pattern as seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Cooperation between Criminal Organizations and Terror Networks**

According to this model, at the outset terrorist organizations seek to increase partnership with transnational criminal organizations due to a growing need for financial resources. The relative gains of the terrorist groups are much higher in this asymmetrical interrelationship because interaction mainly rests on the taxing of the criminal organizations by the terror networks. After the peak, mutual partnership moves into a downward trend for two reasons. First, over the years the terror networks acquire necessary skills and competencies, and develop substructures to run criminal activities rather than remaining dependent on criminal and trafficking organizations. Second, criminal groups develop various strategies to limit exploitation by the terror networks, because continual taxation undermines criminal competitiveness in illicit markets.
The PKK and the KDNs: cooperation and coexistence

The PKK is a Marxist-Leninist terrorist network that aims to establish an independent Kurdistan in Mesopotamia. The PKK’s armed campaign started in 1984 and peaked around the mid-1990s. After the end of Cold War, however, the PKK began to suffer a budgetary crisis as a result of shrinking financial assistance from its Marxist patrons (Demirel, 2001, 2007). This problem was intensified because the PKK's burgeoning terror campaign required increasing financial resources to meet expanding operational, logistical and propaganda expenditures. Consequently, the PKK was in desperate need of new sources of revenue. In this connection, Turkey's exposure to drug trafficking along the Balkan route created new economic opportunities for the PKK's financial apparatus.

In the early years, the PKK's entry into the drug business was largely restricted to taxation and extortion of drug traffickers on the Turkish Iranian border. The PKK's coexistence with Kurdish drug networks (KDNs) operating in the same geographic areas intensified the level of interaction between these two underground entities. Ubiquitous PKK cells along the Turkish-Iranian border allowed the organization to control the flow of illicit goods and provided opportunities for the imposition of taxes by the PKK. Statements of various PKK operatives indicate that the initial contacts between the PKK and the drug traffickers were initiated by Osman Ocalan (a.k.a. Ferhat) (Pek and Ekici, 2007). The PKK exploited the drug trade in two ways. First, the organization established illegal customs check points in mountainous areas of the Turkish Iranian border which were frequently used as transit routes by heroin traffickers (KOM, 1998, 2005b). Second, the PKK offered protection to the KDN’s and imposed “patriotic taxes” as an exchange.

Numerous convicted PKK operatives and members of KDNs have explicitly acknowledged the PKK’s taxation of the drug trade. In his testimony at the Imrali Court, Abdullah Ocalan,\(^5\) noted that “despite my warnings I have learned that my brother [Osman Ocalan]\(^6\) is commissioning the drug traffickers…Taxing is not limited to the drug trade. My brother taxes all kinds of trafficking activities. He controls check points at the Turkish-Iranian border” (www.belgenet.com). There has also been a consensus among convicted drug criminals about the rate of taxes imposed by the PKK. Almost all of the convicts stated that the PKK imposed 10 percent or 1000DM tax per kg of heroin. For instance, a convicted drug criminal M.H. maintained that “the PKK imposes 10 percent tax on traffickers and 1000DM commission on heroin producers. Every drug trafficker who

\(^5\) Abdullah Ocalan had been the leader of the organization. He was arrested in 1999 and sentenced to death penalty.

\(^6\) Osman Ocalan is a one of the top PKK leaders.
crosses the mountainous parts of the Turkish-Iranian border pays this amount” (KOM 2005, p.47). According to M.S.A, another convicted drug criminal, “every drug trafficker had to pay taxes to the PKK. None can transport heroin without permission of the PKK operatives at the Iran border. However, taxation was limited to large volumes. We were not taxed for 3-4 kg shipments.” (KOM, 2005b, p.52)

The PKK's taxing of the drug business was not confined to the Turkish-Iranian border, but spread all across the Balkan Route. By the mid 1990s, a concerted law enforcement crack down in Turkey compelled many heroin kingpins to move their operational headquarters to Europe. At the same time the emasculation of PKK cadres in Europe created new incentives for intensified interaction with the KDNs. In addition to major drug traffickers, the PKK began to impose taxes on Kurdish street dealers - a phenomenon reported by various European law enforcement agencies and confirmed by members of the KDNs and PKK. In September 1999 a joint operation of Hamburg and Hannover police units in Germany dismantled a PKK connected heroin distribution network (Focus Magazine, September 7, 1999). German police reported that this heroin distribution network was transferring 1 Million Marks to the PKK each month. According to the German police, consecutive money transfers at the same amount were a clear indicator of the PKK’s taxing of the KDNs (Focus Magazine, September 7, 1999).  

Beyond border taxation, the PKK began to impose “patriotic taxes” on burgeoning KDNs or “families” by the early 1990s. Several convicted drug criminals and terrorists testified that the PKK had extorted KDNs in the name of "patriotic taxes". In his court appearance, Abdullah Ocalan referred to substantial financial contribution of major KDNs such as the Baybasin, Cihangir and Canturk families. Ocalan noted that “Even Behcet Canturk was providing financial assistance. The organization collected money from the Cihangir Family [in Hakkari/Yuksekova] and the Turk family [in Mardin Province]. Apart from those, many other Kurdish families contribute to the cause of PKK… Heroin revenues are deposited into Swiss bank accounts by a PKK operative code named Sinan” (www.belgenet.com). In one of his interviews with a Dutch TV correspondent, Huseyin Baybasin highlighted that “I'm a Kurd. I'm doing anything for the economic prosperity of the Kurds. I have made many donations to cultural clubs which ended at the hands of the PKK operatives” (TOGEC, 2010).

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7 Huseyin Baybasin was a major heroin kingpin in Turkey and the Netherlands. His drug network has extended all across Europe. He was convicted in 2000 after a Joint operation of KOM and Dutch Law enforcement agencies. In 2002 he was sentenced to life in prison by a Dutch court.
As the years progressed, the PKK began to function as a mediator between KDNs which had become embroiled in conflicts with one another. In some cases, the PKK operatives collected debts from drug transactions in return for a commission. In other cases, the PKK manipulated the mediator status to expand its power over the KDNs. A convicted drug criminal (Code name H.H.) noted that, “Musa Sitoci reported me to the PKK for his remaining debts from a heroin deal. One of the PKK operatives in Russia [Code name Mahir] called me and offered mediation. I refused this offer. Then Mahir asked me to make some contributions to newly established PKK camps in Russia. I refused it too. Then Mahir threatened me with death” (KOM 2005b, p.48).

Many security analysts portray progressive taxing and coexistence as an example of symbiosis. In their view, an overarching Kurdish identity cemented the relationship between the PKK and KDNs (Sahin, 2001; Steinberg 2008; Laciner, 2008). They argued that the idea of having an independent Kurdistan appealed to KDN members as well as PKK operatives. However, this argument remains unsubstantiated in the real world of crime. Analysis of the statements of convicted drug criminals indicates that “patriotic taxes” were not provided on voluntary basis but that PKK operatives extorted money under the shadow of AK 47s. In other words, the interrelationship between the PKK and the KDN was prolonged on the basis of asymmetric power and through a mix of explicit and tacit coercion.

The KDNs knew that failure to comply with PKK taxation would bring about destruction of their networks. A convicted major heroin kingpin, H.H., provided a snapshot view of the extortion mechanism; “Four individuals headed by Osman Tim demanded money on behalf of the PKK. Fearing the assassination or abduction of my relatives in Yuksekova I had to donate 1 billion Turkish Liras. As far as I know, Adnan Yildirim donated 40,000 DM and Savas Buldan donated 70,000 DM.” (quoted in Pek and Ekici p.144). Another convicted drug criminal stated: “I had rendered 15,000DM to I.S. , who threatened me on behalf of the PKK. I.S is PKK's collector in Van province. He collected 20,000 from S. E. , who is another drug trafficker” (KOM 2005b, p.54). As a payback for these “patriotic taxes”, the PKK promised to provide "security" to drug traffickers. The KNDs accepted this “security” proposal reluctantly as they had no military power to challenge the supremacy of the PKK cells along the Balkan route. Ironically, the principal security challenge to the KDNs has been the PKK itself.

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8 Osman Tim was a PKK regional “tax” collector
9 Adnan Yildirim had been a major heroin kingpin
10 Savas Buldan had been a major heroin kingpin
Conflicting interests and turf wars

Analysis of the statements of narcotics investigators, convicted criminals and PKK operatives revealed that the nexus of the PKK and the KDNs has never scaled up to convergence. In other words, the PKK has never engaged in structural merging with any of the Kurdish drug trafficking organizations. Even though the PKK and KDNs developed ad hoc alliances, several factors hindered the hybridization of these two underground networks. First, the PKK's main target has remained a free Kurdistan, whereas the KDNs, despite their partial sympathy to Kurdish independence, remained profit oriented. Second, the PKK's over-exploitation of KDNs through taxation and extortion created a backlash provoking non-cooperative behavior among the criminal entrepreneurs. Third, expansion of PKK control over the European drug economy sparked a reaction in Dutch, German and British underground drug markets. It drew the KDNs closer to one another in an attempt to counterbalance the PKK's coercive exploitation. Fourth, bilateral partnership became a vulnerability and liability for the KDNs due to the heightened focus of security agencies on financing of terrorism, especially after September 11, 2001.

Despite ad hoc instances of cooperation at various stages of the illicit drug business, motivational divergences set the KDNs and the PKK apart. The PKK's ultimate goal is establishment of a free Kurdistan in Mesopotamia, while the ultimate goal of the KDNs is profit maximization. Moreover, there were significant costs associated with the PKK's over engagement in the drug business. To some extent this involvement undermined the organization’s ideological image, especially as many Western states listed the organization among narco-traffickers. Furthermore, narcotics investigations of many European law enforcement agencies ended in the conviction of numerous PKK operatives. In other words, counter-drug investigations opened the floodgates for a concerted police crackdown against PKK cells. Although involvement in the drug business provided important resource augmentation, it also hurt the PKK’s reputation and increased its vulnerability.

The PKK's over-exploitation of the KDNs through "patriotic taxes" also sparked a backlash among the drug networks. The counter-reaction became particularly apparent when it coincided with shrinking heroin markets. Many KDNs experienced trouble with marketing heroin in the Dutch, German and British underground markets that used to be the principal delivery destinations. In some cases, the drug networks could not market heroin loads for months at a time. Consequently, they became less willing to pay taxes to PKK operatives. The KDNs’ market share contracted for three major reasons. First, European drug markets experienced a shift of demand from depressants to stimulants, mainly cocaine and ATS (UNODC 2004, EMCDDA 2004). The supply of these drugs to European markets
was and is dominated and controlled by Eastern European, Russian and South American organizations. The entry of KDNs into these markets is unlikely since these other organizations are so deeply entrenched. Second, since the end of the Cold War, Eastern European criminal organizations have expanded their importance as drug suppliers. Albanians and Russians established sophisticated trafficking and distribution networks that overthrew the monopoly of Turkish organized crime groups. Accordingly, the KDNs’ market share diminished rapidly. With the debilitating impact of contracting heroin markets, the "patriotic taxes" imposed by the PKK became far more onerous and burdensome for the KDNs. As a result, the KDNs became more resistant to paying a share of their profits to PKK accountants.

Third, it was in this context that the PKK established its own trafficking and distribution networks across Eurasia. The PKK's ubiquitous distribution networks progressively challenged and sometimes expelled the heroin distribution apparatus of the KDNs. This provoked vicious turf battles between the PKK and KDNs, in the German, Dutch and British underground markets (Pek and Ekici, 2007). Particularly after the mid-1990s, European law enforcement agencies continuously reported fierce battles between the PKK and KDNs to control street distribution of drugs. In London turf battles between the Bombacilar (Bombers) and the PKK peaked during the early 2000s (BBC, April 7, 2006). Bombacilar is a sophisticated heroin distribution network that operated under the auspices of the Baybasin family, particularly Abdullah Baybasin. Members of this group have been selected from among the young Kurdish immigrants. On November 2002, British media reported fierce street battles between the PKK and Bombacilar, which ended with 1 death and 20 injuries (BBC, April 7, 2006).

Bovernkerk and Yesilgoz (2004) also reported fierce battles between the PKK and other Kurdish groups in Amsterdam. According to them, the PKK used various techniques to intimidate the KDNs. These included brutal assassinations, including beheadings, as well as reporting the KDN’s activities to law enforcement agencies. This watershed in relations became increasingly visible since early 2000s. The turf battles in the Netherlands intensified after the imprisonment of Huseyin Baybasin, who had been the “strongest” heroin kingpin in the country (Bovernkerk and Yesilgoz 2004). Baybasin felt betrayed and accused the PKK of withholding political support during his trial. From then on The Baybasin family became the bulwark of opposition to the PKK's growing monopoly over at least the Turkish portion of European heroin markets (Summers, 2006). Both Baybasin and Abdullah Ocalan acknowledged that the cooperative relationship had ended during the 1990s (KOM 2005b) and been replaced by a hostile relationship.
The PKK's cooperation with drug trafficking organizations also damaged the ideological image of the organization. The PKK's ideologues initially designed the organization as a nationalist movement, not as a criminal enterprise. Many militants and sympathizers remain committed to the "cause" as long as the PKK remains the voice of the Kurdish independence movement. Involvement in the drug business, however, not only undermined the commitments of sympathizers and militants but also PKK's foreign patrons. Moreover, after the Turkish government released evidence of the PKK’s drug linkages, many European and American agencies designated the PKK as a narco-terrorist organization. Thus, links with the drug business became the Achilles heel of the PKK movement.

**PKK’s specialization in drug business**

Instead of converging with the KDNs, the PKK embarked on a structural transformation to acclimatize itself to the conditions of underground drug markets. Several factors propelled this development. First, KDNs had become less cooperative as the tensions heightened between the two differentially motivated networks. Second, a decade of coexistence and heightened interaction with the KDNs allowed PKK operatives to master the fundamental principles of the drug trade. Therefore, the PKK no longer needed the KDNs for instructional guidance. In effect, the PKK moved from taxing and contracting out trafficking activities to the development of in-house capabilities and competencies. Third, after the 3rd Congress, the PKK established semi-independent cells for the drug business. The presence of PKK cells along the Balkan Route provided a substantial advantage in the drug trade. Fourth, by the early 1990s the PKK’s intensified terror campaign required increased financial resources. In order to cover growing operational costs, the PKK operatives decided to eliminate intermediaries in the drug business and replace them directly. These developments undergirded the PKK’s efforts to establish control over all phases of the drug business from cultivation to street distribution, rather than remaining dependent on the KDNs.

Initially, PKK operatives had lacked appropriate skills and competencies for a thriving involvement in the illicit drug business. Taxation was the only way that they could expropriate money in the underground markets. However, as the PKK's armed campaign reached its zenith in the mid 1990s, the PKK operatives acknowledged that taxing drug traffickers was not sufficient to cover operational expenses. Instead of remaining dependent on "patriotic taxes" imposed on the KDNs, PKK leaders began to run the drug trade directly using what might be described as semi-independent clandestine cells. These cells had gained expertise and knowhow about the “business” through their prolonged if
asymmetrical relationship with the KDNs. This partnership allowed PKK leaders to master the necessary skills for involvement in all phases of the drug business. Moreover, PKK members learned the codes of conduct and modus operandi of underground drug markets. They established connections with the key nodes in both the production and distribution phases. As a result, the PKK's dependence on KDNs progressively vanished. The master-apprentice relationship was transformed initially into a roughly equal partnership. Eventually, however, an asymmetry began to develop in favor of the PKK's drug cells, which sought monopolistic control of the European heroin markets. Statements by law enforcement investigators, drug criminals and convicted PKK operatives indicate that particularly after the late 1990s the PKK's relationship with KDNs grew much weaker. In many cases, cooperative relationships were replaced with enmity and turf wars.

The PKK’s structural metamorphosis after the Third Congress paved the way for a more practical allotment of the PKK cadres for financial and economic operations. Specific PKK operatives in Europe, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria were reallocated to a financial wing that was responsible for raising funds through a set of legal and illegal means. The PKK's economic apparatus became more institutionalized after the KARSAZ convention in 2001 (KOM 2005b). The KARSAZ substructure became responsible for providing sustainable income from all types of activities including the trafficking of drugs, human and weapons. However, in the illegal realm, drug profits constituted the bulk of the money supply (Laciner, 2007) and PKK leaders attached the utmost importance to their semi-independent drug cells. As the years progressed, the PKK began to exhibit more criminal characteristics and its clandestine drug substructures grow exponentially (Sahin 2001). The PKK cells adapted to the new criminal environment without much difficulty. Operatives in these cells were selected from militants with no criminal records. The PKK divided the new recruits into three parts; a military branch, a political branch and a financial branch (Demirel 2001, 2005). The people selected for the financial branch were trained to collect financial resources from criminal transactions including drug trafficking. Leaders of drug cells reported to the regional PKK leaders and accountants.

During the 1990s, the PKK intensified its involvement into drug trade to reap the benefits of the enormous profit margin from production sites in Southwest Asia to the end users in Europe. During the 1990s, a kilo of heroin was sold for US$ 3,000-4,000 in Southwest Asia, US$ 45,000 in Germany, US$ 54,000 in the UK, and above US$ 100,000 in Spain and Finland (UNODC 2006). Moreover, the fact that the purity level decreased from 90 percent in Southwest Asia to less than 7 percent in Western Europe expanded the profit margin an additional twelvefold (EMCDDA, 2004). The PKK's well-established
clandestine networks allowed the elimination of intermediaries and whole-handed control of the drug business. In other words, these ubiquitous networks were able to purchase heroin in Southwest Asia and deliver it to the end users in Europe, thereby reducing transaction costs and enabling the PKK to expand its market share at the expense of KDNs.

Over the past decade, the reduction of the demand for the opiates and the upward spiral of the demand for the Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) and cocaine compelled the PKK operatives to adjust to new market conditions. In addition to the existing heroin trade, PKK cells entered into the synthetic drug markets. There is abundant evidence on the PKK's involvement in the trafficking and street distribution of ATS. For example, the KOM (2009) reported seizure of 337,412 ATS tablets from PKK militants in multiple cases. This number only included seizures in KOM jurisdiction and did not include seizures in the Gendarmerie district. However, there is no evidence of the PKK’s engagement in the ATS production process. Available information indicates that instead of producing the ATS, the PKK operatives exchange ecstasy for heroin. In some cases, the same couriers brought ecstasy from Europe (mainly from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) to Istanbul and exchanged it for heroin.\(^{11}\) Then the exchanged heroin was transported in the same way using similar concealment methods. Several of our interviewees confirmed this. One drug investigator noted that, “we also observe that the criminal networks are bartering the heroin with synthetics in Turkey. They are bringing heroin from the east and bringing the amphetamines from the west. Then they exchange the substances in various destinations in Turkey.”\(^ {12}\)

Over the past two decades increasing numbers of PKK members have been arrested for drug-related crimes. According to KOM (2009) Drug Report, 807 PKK members were arrested for involvement in 359 drug cultivation, production, trafficking and distribution cases between 1984 and 2009 (See table 1). This number does not include the PKK’s drug convicts in Europe.

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\(^{11}\) Our interview with a drug investigator, June 30, 2009

\(^{12}\) ibid
Table 1: PKK related drug seizures 1984-2009

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Drugs</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Unit</th>
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<th>Kilogram</th>
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<td></td>
<td>4111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashish/marihuana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22,729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphone base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acetic anhydride</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opium gum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>337,412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium carbonate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug lab</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IN TOTAL, 807 INDIVIDUALS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED IN THESE CASES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*From taxing to controlling cannabis cultivation*

In the early years, the PKK was content with taxing cannabis cultivation in Iran, Syria and Turkey. As the PKK matured in the early 1990s, however, the organization took direct control of cannabis cultivation. Instead of simply taxing existing cannabis farmers, the PKK coerced underemployed peasants to cultivate cannabis on behalf of the so-called “Kurdish independence movement”. From the early 1990s onwards, PKK operatives gained control of cannabis fields in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey. For instance, a convicted drug criminal, N.B., highlighted that, “PKK coercively orders the Kurdish peasants to cultivate cannabis on behalf of the PKK. They even push them to plant cannabis at unattended mountainous districts. Because of this pressure, I cultivated 20 acres of cannabis. During the crop season 70 percent of the fields in Yolcati and Dibek villages were occupied with cannabis plant because of the PKK pressure” (KOM, 2005b, p49).

Harvested marihuana or hashish was hidden in scattered PKK shelters or buried underground until a marketing opportunity emerged. Various Turkish security authorities, mainly the KOM and the Gendarmerie, seized 23 tons of cannabis in multiple PKK shelters.
and safe houses (KOM 2009). Some of these seizures are presented in Table 1: The seizures increased year by year and peaked between 1993 and 1997.

**Table 2**: Some PKK related cannabis seizures in 1994-1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Amount &amp; type of drugs</th>
<th>Seized by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 13, 1994</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>534 kg hashish</td>
<td>KOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 13, 1994</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>212 kg cannabis seeds</td>
<td>KOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Aug-94</td>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>120,000 roots of cannabis plant</td>
<td>KOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-Sep-95</td>
<td>Sanliurfa</td>
<td>270 kg cannabis seed</td>
<td>KOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Jul-94</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>213 kg seed, 6000 roots, 534 kg hashish</td>
<td>Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Aug-94</td>
<td>Bingol</td>
<td>50 kg hashish,</td>
<td>Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Aug-94</td>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>150 kg hashish, 2 sacs cannabis seeds, hashish production tools</td>
<td>Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Aug-94</td>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>1500 kg hashish, 1,467,000 roots</td>
<td>Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-Mar-94</td>
<td>Hakkari</td>
<td>328 kg hashish</td>
<td>Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In August 1994, 2 kg marihuana and 120,000 roots of cannabis plants were seized and 13 individuals arrested. One of the convicted criminals, R.I., noted that “the PKK was forcing us to plant cannabis in rural areas of Diyarbakir. I'm rendering much of the money to the PKK operatives. They come and supervise the harvesting process. It is almost impossible to divert some of the crops” (KOM 2005b, p.56). R.I.’s testimony led to the seizure of an additional 1,150,000 roots of cannabis plants on August 12, 1994.
Heroin production/processing

At the end of the 1980s, the PKK embarked on heroin production since it was much more profitable than buying from suppliers. Moreover, heroin production and processing enables alteration of both purity levels and volume of output. PKK operatives established numerous mobile heroin laboratories along the Turkish-Iranian border. Indeed, many PKK militants confessed that the PKK was operating several heroin labs in the mountainous parts of Northwestern Iran. The testimony of an Iranian drug convict confirmed this phenomenon. According to him, “The PKK has established several drug labs in Urumiye-Aliabat District of Iran under the control of Osman Ocalan. The chemists receive $40,000-50,000 Toman per kg for producing heroin. After the production, the heroin is transferred to the Banya village (Iran) to be transferred to Yuksekova (Turkey) under the control of Osman Ocalan’s militants.” (KOM 2005b, pp.67-68)

According to KOM in 1998, 45 PKK members had been arrested in 17 heroin production cases. In 15 of these cases there was no substantial evidence that the PKK members were producing heroin on behalf of the organization. However, in two cases the statements of the individuals involved along with other evidence, clearly indicated that at least some heroin labs were operated under PKK auspices. Istanbul KOM units dismantled a heroin lab on November 12, 1998. In this incident12 kg of heroin and 27 kg pre-heroin residue was seized and 4 individuals, including the PKK's Maltepe district commander, Fethullah Dur, were arrested (KOM 1998). Consecutive operations ended with the seizure of numerous PKK documents in the production sites and residences of the individuals.

In an earlier case, a heroin lab had been dismantled in Tekirdag province in March 1995. According to the KOM (1998) this heroin lab was stationed in a farm owned by the K1 family. The K1 family had been functioning as a PKK cell in the production and trafficking of heroin. One branch of the family was actively participating in PKK militant activities while the other branch was running the drug business and providing substantial amounts of money to the PKK's accountants. Several members of the family had been arrested for both PKK membership and involvement in the drug trade.

Not surprisingly, the PKK has also been engaged in the trafficking of precursors for heroin production. PKK cells in Russia and Eastern Europe were responsible for the provision of acetic anhydride, while cells in Pakistan, Southeast Asia and Iran provided the morphine base. Various provincial units of KOM seized 26 tons of acetic anhydride from the PKK operatives in multiple cases (KOM 2009). For instance, in December 2002, a joint operation of Turkish, American and Russian law enforcement agencies lead to the seizure
of 3.5 tons of acetic anhydride in Elazig province and the arrest of 14 individuals (Yenisafak, December 17, 2002). One of the convicted criminals reported that the organizers of the precursor transshipment were PKK's Moscow coordinator [aka. Mahir] and his lieutenants. The initial case report from Russian law enforcement agencies indicated that numerous PKK documents were found at the homes of the organizers (Yenisafak, December 17, 2002).

However, the PKK's heroin processing activities subsequently and progressively diminished for three reasons. First, was the establishment of many heroin labs across Southwest Asia where opium is cultivated (UNODC, 2009). Instead of transporting ten kilograms of opium, traffickers prefer transporting one kilogram of heroin. Thus, most of the opiates brought into Turkish territory were already in the form of heroin. Second, concerted law enforcement efforts to stop the flow of acetic anhydride produced very positive results. Operation Topaz, a comprehensive international project, alone resulted in seizure of over 200 tons of acetic anhydride (INCB, 2002). Third, with the rise of China, heroin producers began to divert precursors from Chinese industrial markets, instead of European providers (UNDOC 2009). Transnational criminal organizations began to produce heroin in South Asia, Central Asia and Russia. The sharp decline of precursor seizures in Turkey and Europe is an indicator of the shift in heroin production sites by the new millennium.

*From “patriotic taxes” to mastery of drug trafficking*

During the 1990s, KDNs became less willing to pay “patriotic taxes” to the PKK due to shrinking profit margins. It was in this context that the PKK increasingly embarked on trafficking of various drugs and precursor chemicals, mainly heroin, morphine base, opium gum, hashish, acetic anhydride and synthetics. PKK leaders deployed special cells in the drug business, which only reported to regional leaders and accountants. The PKK’s well-established cadres along the Balkan Route became a cut out for the drug trade. PKK operatives swiftly adapted to the new business because they were quite familiar with clandestine operating systems. By the end of 1990s, the PKK began to out-perform the KDNs in drug trafficking.

This PKK involvement in drug trafficking has been acknowledged by many PKK members, including some of the organization’s top operatives. In his interview with the
Chairman of Human Rights Commission, Semdin Sakik\textsuperscript{13} admitted that PKK cadres were actively engaged in drug trafficking. Sakik noted that “our principal financial resource has been the drug trade. The PKK has made enormous amounts of money from its drug business. We bought weapons with this money. For example, we bought 50 stinger missiles from Greece. We bought some weapons from Iran too.” (www.tubim.gov.tr). Many convicted drug criminals also stated that the PKK used coercion to deploy traffickers on behalf of the organization. Reluctant individuals were threatened with death. One convicted drug criminal, M.D, noted that “My boss Mehmet was a major drug trafficker. I was arrested for trafficking his heroin. Subsequent to my departure from the prison he held me accountable for the seizure. He threatened that either I would pay for that shipment or I should join the PKK cadres.” (KOM 2005b, p.32)

Turkish security institutions have consistently reported PKK-related drug seizures in PKK shelters, safe houses and various other compounds. According to KOM (2005), law enforcement and military agencies seized various drugs in 60 PKK shelters and safe houses between 1990 and 1997, when PKK’s terror campaign peaked. The KOM (2005b) report on the connection between narcotics and terrorism identified many cases of PKK related drug seizures. In July 1996, local gendarmerie officers reported that a group of PKK terrorists were killed in an armed battle with Turkish security forces. After the end of the encounter, 20 kg of heroin was found with the dead bodies. Subsequent investigations resulted in the destruction of a cannabis field owned by one of the dead terrorists. In another case, on March 23, 1994, Turkish military forces raided a PKK shelter in Diyarbakir province. The operation resulted in the seizure of 14 rifles, 21 hand grenades, 9 mines, various other explosives and 328 kg of marihuana and the arrest of 5 PKK operatives (p.69). On November 29, 1992, 15 kg heroin was seized in Mersin province by local KOM units. One of the fugitives, K.K. was arrested at Kapikule border gate while attempting to escape with a false identity. In his court statement, H.K. noted that, "I'm doing this trafficking on behalf of the PKK. I'm delivering the proceeds of the heroin deal to the chief PKK accountant in Germany." (p.116). S. K, the other key actor in this case, also admitted that they had been trafficking heroin on behalf of the PKK. As seen in table 3 seizures in numerous PKK compounds constitute substantial evidences of the PKK’s direct involvement in the drug business.

\textsuperscript{13} Semdin Sakik was the deputy leader of the PKK until 1998 when he surrendered to the Turkish security forces due to heightened conflicts with the leader, Abdullah Ocalan. After his surrender he gave very valuable statements on the modus operandi of the PKK. He published several books while he was in the prison.
Table 3: Some seizures in political refugee camps and safe houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Providence</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Place of seizure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>9.745 kg heroin</td>
<td>refugee camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01.09.1994</td>
<td>Hakkari</td>
<td>1 kg heroin</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.08.1994</td>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>60 kg heroin</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.08.1994</td>
<td>Hakkari</td>
<td>1 kg heroin</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.10.1994</td>
<td>Van</td>
<td>23 kg hashish</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.02.1996</td>
<td>Sirnak</td>
<td>37 kg hashish</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.10.1996</td>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>49.571 kg hashish</td>
<td>safe house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As well as Turkish authorities, various European institutions reported the PKK's increasing role in drug supply. The chief prosecutor of Germany reported that almost 80 percent of the heroin coming into Europe was supplied by the PKK or affiliated sub-networks (Tudor 2002). Italian authorities also claimed that the PKK was accountable for trafficking of substantial amounts of heroin into Italy (Ventura 1998). Various British, Dutch, Spanish and Swedish law enforcement institutions and Interpol reported PKK's active engagement in heroin trafficking into Europe (Dandurand and Chin, 2004). An earlier Interpol report in 1999 had revealed that the agency investigated more than 100 drug trafficking cases involving the PKK. These investigations resulted in the seizure of over 15 tons of various types of drugs (Interpol 1999). On January 7, 1993, 6 PKK operatives were arrested with 5 kg heroin in Offenbach Germany (Sahin 2001). One of the arrested operatives, A.D., had been PKK's regional accountant. A.D. had been on the wanted list of Turkish law enforcement agencies for a long time due to his key role in PKK's financial activities (Sahin 2001). European law enforcement agencies also reported that the use of the Kurdish language and codes of conduct made it extremely hard to develop successful police infiltration. 14 The police had difficulty with undercover operations and electronic surveillance against the PKK’s drug cells. In many cases, operation files were closed due to an inability to transcribe and translate Kurdish communications.

14 Our interview with a drug investigator, June 24, 2009
Nevertheless, various research organizations have also reported PKK involvement in drug trafficking. Francois Haut, the chairman of the Paris Criminology Institute, noted that the PKK was accountable for 80 percent of the heroin supply in France and made millions of dollars each year from the heroin trade (PIC B, 1997). Sedat Laciner, the Director of the International Research Center, noted that “between 2004 and 2005, the amount of drug just caught [from the PKK operatives] in the Netherlands was more than 400 kg. With reference to 2005 European data, the PKK is the primary actor of the illegal European drug trade... 80 % of European drug market was Turkish origin (it means Kurdish origin); and the PKK manages it... the number of the PKK members in British prisons is more than 1000” (Laciner, 2007).

**PKK’s growing monopoly in heroin distribution**

Street distribution of drugs is the last stand of the illicit drug business for terrorists and organized crime groups, and entails extra professionalism and comprehensively stealthy networks. By the late 1990s, heroin markets in the Netherlands, Germany and some parts of the U.K were controlled by the PKK (Bovernkerk and Chakra, 2004). The PKK not only used its well-established cadres but it coerced many Kurdish immigrants to assist in heroin distribution. The PKK had no hard time in finding street dealers in Europe due to abundance of Kurdish immigrants suffering from unemployment and poverty. Moreover, the PKK abused political protection in Europe and penetrated into refugee camps to identify and mobilize new recruits for street sales.

Many European institutions reported on the PKK’s control of street distribution of heroin. For instance, in 1993 German law enforcement agencies arrested numerous Kurdish refugee children for heroin distribution. During their interrogation, many of the children confessed that their exploiters were PKK operatives in Germany (Sahin 2001). In September 1993, Hamburg police department arrested a group of heroin dealers including an 11 year-old teenager (The McKenzie Institute 2006). The investigations revealed that the PKK had brought these Kurdish refugees specifically for heroin distribution. In January 1994, Stuttgart Police arrested 76 Kurdish street dealers; 6 of these had records of PKK membership (KOM 2005b). Many of the remaining convicts confessed that they were acting on behalf of the PKK, which was exploiting the street delivery of drugs. The German Police dismantled another sophisticated heroin distribution network on September 7, 1999. The operation revealed that the PKK was monopolizing heroin distribution in Hamburg and Hannover. Law enforcement authorities revealed that Kurdish heroin distribution networks
transferred 10 million marks to the PKK each month. One convicted drug dealer in Germany noted “I have met a man codenamed Sadik, who was coordinating heroin distribution for the PKK. He offered to sell heroin in a forceful manner. He told me that the PKK would commission 70 percent tax on my sales.” (KOM 2005b, p.91)

The PKK exploited Kurdish cultural clubs and refugee camps as recruitment bases for drug dealers. According to KOM (2003), there were as many as 298 cultural clubs in Europe, which functioned as drug distribution hubs. Multiple European law enforcement agencies reported heroin seizures in Kurdish refugee camps. After a Kurdish heroin distributor and a German drug user were arrested on January 6 1996, by the German police (KOM 2005b), further investigations lead to the seizure of significant amounts of drugs in the dealer's residence, which had been a refugee dwelling house under the control of the PKK. Police records indicated that there had been several other seizures in the same apartment complex used by Kurdish refugees. On November 10, 1993, German police had arrested 22 Kurdish individuals with 16 kg heroin. Almost all of the individuals had been residing in refugee camps and 7 of them were on the Turkish National Police (TNP) wanted list for PKK membership (KOM 2005b, p.94).

In 1992, Hamburg police arrested numerous Kurdish children between the ages of 8 and 12 for distribution of heroin (Hamburg Local TV, September 15 1995). The investigations revealed that almost all of these children had been brought to Hamburg by the PKK for heroin dealing. During the interrogation, the children stated that they were forced by the PKK to sell drugs in the streets since their age meant that they were not held criminally responsible for their activities. (Hamburg Local TV, September 15 1995). An informant revealed that the PKK also used “illegal immigrants in Europe for heroin distribution by threatening. The immigrants do this because they are mostly unemployed and hungry. They always have the risk of deportation. They are threatened with being informed to police.”

Conclusions

The PKK's interaction with KDNs did not follow a linear path. Instead, it followed an inverted U shape pattern. The PKK's initial relationship with the KDNs was in the form of taxation and extortion of the proceeds of drug-related crimes. Coexistence in the same territory or common opportunity space laid the grounds for an alliance of expediency between the drug traffickers and PKK operatives. Many convicted PKK members,

15 Our interview with a drug investigator
including Abdullah Ocalan, highlighted that PKK was imposing 1000DM or 10 percent taxes on the drug traffickers at the Turkish Iranian border. De facto customs check points allowed the PKK to control the trans-border flow of drugs. In some ways this was similar to Peru in the 1990s when Sendero Luminoso appeared to be working together with drug trafficking organizations in the Upper Huallaga Valley. Although this has often been presented as the classic example of alliance between drug traffickers and terrorists, Pablo Dreyfus argued very persuasively that it was “difficult to define the relationship between drug traffickers and Sendero Luminoso as an alliance or even a ‘marriage of convenience’. The traffickers accepted Sendero’s protection because they did not have a choice. The terrorists defeated them militarily. Moreover, the pattern of interaction between traffickers and Sendero was less than beneficial for the traffickers because the insurgents obliged them to pay higher coca prices to the peasants.” Similarly, in the case of the PKK and the KDN, the relationship was never really one of symmetrical benefit.

It was to become even more one-sided. As the years progressed, PKK interests began to clash with the KDNs. First, the PKK began to over-exploit KDNs for “patriotic taxation.” This created a backlash among Kurdish organized criminals whose market share was already contracting as a result of the growing influence of Albanian, Moroccan and Russian criminal organizations. Moreover, with declining heroin demand in Europe declining, the KDNs were already having trouble in marketing drugs across the European markets. This made the extortion/protection even more onerous for the KDNs. Second, the PKK exerted relentless efforts to expand its market share in European markets at the expense of KDNs. PKK militants began to attack Kurdish heroin distributors to oust them out of their turf. Many KDNs such as the Baybasin family responded in kind but could not halt let alone reverse the PKK’s efforts to monopolize heroin markets. Fierce turf-battles between the PKK and various drug networks occurred, especially in the Netherlands and the UK. Cooperation never recovered to the level of the pre-1990 period.

Instead of remaining dependent on KDNs, the PKK developed extensive substructures to run its own drug business. Underground PKK networks along the Balkan Route enabled the organization to control the full cycle of the drug trade. Over the years the PKK professionalized itself in every facet of the illicit drug business. The members excelled in provision, production, trafficking, distribution and transfer of money. The growing sophistication of the PKK’s drug apparatus made the organization far less dependent on the KDNs.

Yet, there are also some broader implications of this analysis for our understanding of the relationship between terrorist and criminal organizations. The PKK-KDN
experience suggests that, fortunately, the vision of synergistic cooperation envisaged by some observers might prove much more elusive than anticipated. The tensions between the PKK and KDNs suggest that the relationship between political and for-profit criminal organizations might as easily be characterized by turbulence and conflict as by harmony and cooperation. This was largely because the PKK approach was always coercive, whether through the imposition of taxes or a highly competitive approach seeking to dominate the market and relegate or eliminate rivals. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that assumptions about cooperation made by some observers are inconsistent with the empirical evidence. Moreover, in this case at least, the appropriation of criminal methods by the terrorist organization was ultimately more important than cooperation with criminals – although the linkage to KDNs was certainly helpful in the early stages of PKK development, assisting the organization in developing its own knowledge and skills in the drug business.

At one level, the story is one of remarkable achievement and adaptation by the PKK. Yet there has also been a down-side. Indeed, terrorist use of criminal activities for fund-raising has paradoxical consequences, strengthening the group in the short term but possibly compromising or weakening it in the long-term. Criminal fund-raising can help terrorist organizations expand their political and military campaigns but is not without risk, which can be understood in terms of a slippery slope of criminality. Terrorist organizations that become overly involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking risk a loss of legitimacy with their political sympathizers. Moreover, the drug business can subtly erode their sense of identity as expanding funding, which is initially a means to an end, becomes an end in itself. The cause can easily get lost in the shuffle. In other words, PKK resort to drug trafficking for funding, although at one level remarkably successful might also have been a double-edged sword, supporting but also weakening the terrorist organization.
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UN Security Council resolution 2001 (SC res. 1373)


