

VIEWPOINT**Josef Joffe**

A Broken Window of Opportunity

After Ocalan's arrest, the E.U. should address the Kurds' legitimate grievances

WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE YOUR OFFICE TRASHED OR your head blown off? The choice is obvious, and so is the difference between Kurdish terrorism and the terrorism of the 1970s and '80s. Palestinians used to hijack planes and mow down Israeli athletes in Europe. Iranians systematically blew away "enemies of the Revolution" in a wide swath between Berlin and Paris. But Kurdish terror, as we saw last week, is different in three ways. It is less deadly and less focused, but more pervasive. Indeed, it can blanket Europe at the snap of a fax machine.

The pattern was standard-issue everywhere—in Vienna, the Hague, London, Zurich, Berlin and several other German cities. Embassies and consulates were occupied, hostages were taken. Windows were smashed, then computers—apparently a favorite Kurdish target—sailed through the air. Downtown demonstrations escalated into bloody battles with the police as if choreographed by remote control.

But the targets weren't just the offices of the Greek government, whom the Kurds hold responsible for delivering their beloved leader Abdullah Ocalan into the hands of the hated Turks. In Hamburg, for instance, the local headquarters of the Social Democratic Party was occupied and ransacked while its boss was held hostage for nine hours. This was particularly ironic because the German left has always been as sympathetic to the Kurds as it has been hostile to Ankara.

For all their apparent madness, though, Ocalan's henchmen have been crazy like foxes. Throughout the years, the game of the P.K.K., the Kurdish Workers' Party, has been what strategic theory calls the rationality of irrationality. The point is to get your way by threatening to lose control. Assume I want to extort 500 euros from my neighbor by politely promising to commit suicide on his doorstep if he refuses. He might just as politely ask me to go home and reconsider. But if I foam at the mouth while holding a cocked gun to my temple with a shaking hand, he will be more willing to part with his money promptly.

Threatening large-scale violence at a moment's notice has been the basis of P.K.K. power in Europe. Indeed, the Kurds have managed to take their host countries hostage. Just take a look at Germany and Italy. The Italians had Mr. Ocalan and let him skip the country in January; the Germans had a warrant out for him but chose not to ask for extradition. Why? He was, after all, wanted for multiple murder. The answer is that both Bonn and Rome had succumbed to unspoken Kurdish blackmail: either you let him go, or we trash your country.

As the great cynic Talleyrand would have said: This was worse than cowardice—it was a mistake. Because one month later, German cities were trashed, although Mr. Ocalan was nabbed in faraway Kenya. So there are some useful lessons in this.

First, you can't make long-term deals with terrorists who believe that their goals justify any means. Both France and Germany thought at various times that they would be spared in exchange for granting a measure of immunity to Arab and Iranian operatives. In the end, they weren't—look at the Paris bombing campaign of 1985-86 and the "Mykonos" murders in Berlin in 1992.

Second, the "broken window" syndrome operates in politically motivated crime. For years, European authorities have let P.K.K. activists get away with mayhem and extortion. Violence, especially in Germany, became a no-risk ritual for Kurdish militants. They would run riot, ransack a building, then take people inside hostage. When they withdrew many hours later, the police would at best make symbolic arrests. Clearly, the signal was that a felony was not a felony if committed by P.K.K. thugs. No wonder, then, that the P.K.K. sent its shock troops on a rampage in nine cities last week even though the Germans had nothing to do with Mr. Ocalan's arrest.

Third, as this example shows, you can't negotiate with this type of post-traditional terror because Europeans don't have what the P.K.K. wants. The European Union cannot deliver a Kurdish state, or quash the Turkish military's internal war against the P.K.K. in the southeast. There is only one thing Western Europe can and should do. It should stop treating P.K.K. violence—actually terror—as a misdemeanor. It should at last focus its major intelligence capabilities on the P.K.K., break up its underground command structure, and arrest, try and convict those who instigate and commit mayhem.

The P.K.K. has been treating its European hosts as hostages and has given hundreds of thousands of law-abiding Kurds a bad name. With the P.K.K.'s grip loosened, Europe can and should turn to the legitimate grievances of the Kurds. They will not get their own Kurdistan because that would require carving up Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. But among that fearsome foursome, Europe can at least act on Turkey, its crucial NATO ally. The deal is obvious: you talk autonomy and cultural rights with the Kurds, and we talk about your ever closer union with the E.U. Alas, that requires more wisdom than the poisoned relationship between Brussels and Ankara can currently deliver. ■

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