



## Members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Execute 13 Turkish Hostages in Northern Iraq

Kurdish guerillas belonging to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, executed 13 Turkish hostages in northern Iraq after Turkey initiated a rescue mission to free them. The hostages had been held for between five and six years, having been abducted by the PKK after peace negotiations between the group and the Turkish government broke down. The PKK released a statement saying that the hostages had been killed during Turkish aerial attacks preceding the failed rescue mission, but autopsies revealed that the prisoners had been shot. In the aftermath of the executions, the Turkish authorities detained over 715 people who allegedly had ties to the PKK. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey and the United States, and its political wing has been banned by Turkey.

Turkey launched an offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq on February 10th, and it is believed that the hostages were killed shortly after the attack began. Turkey's defense minister Hulusi Akar confirmed as much, despite the PKK's statement alleging that Turkish airstrikes were responsible for the deaths of the hostages. Among the hostages killed were two police officers and five military personnel, with the rest yet to be identified. The Turkish military also said that 48 PKK militants and three Turkish soldiers had been killed during the raid.

The United States released a statement condemning the hostage executions "at the hands of a designated terrorist organization." However, the original State Department comment said that the United States had been unable to independently verify that the PKK was in fact responsible for the deaths of the hostages. The American ambassador to Turkey was promptly summoned where Ankara's dissatisfaction with the statement was expressed. Secretary of State Antony Blinken later called his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to affirm the Turkish sentiment that the PKK bore sole responsibility for the execution of the hostages.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized the United States during a speech to lawmakers of his party, saying the U.S. was responsible for arming the PKK. In reality, the United States supports the YPG, or People's Protection Units, which is a Kurdish force in Syria fighting the Assad regime. Erdogan assailed the United States' alleged complicity in the hostage execution, and said that as a NATO ally, the United States should be doing more to support Turkey against the PKK.

Inside Turkey, opposition lawmakers and human rights organizations criticized the Erdogan government for not negotiating with the PKK to secure the release of the hostages. The head of the Turkish Human Rights Association, Ozturk Turkdogan, said the Turkish security services were hellbent on a military mission to rescue the hostages, despite his organization's attempts to lobby the government to negotiate their release. Lawmakers from the H.D.P., a pro-Kurdish political party, criticized both the Erdogan government and the PKK for their respective roles in the deaths of the hostages. Several H.D.P. lawmakers were also arrested as part of Erdogan's crackdown on individuals who are believed to have ties to the PKK.