Turkey’s Revival of a Dirty ‘Deep State’

Exclusive: NATO keeps backing Turkey, one of its members, despite its aid to the Islamic State and other jihadists fighting Syria’s secular government – and even though Turkey’s erratic President Erdogan may be leading NATO into a risky showdown with Syria’s Russian allies, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Turkey’s embattled President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is resurrecting the “deep state” alliance of secret intelligence operatives and extreme rightists that he so notably challenged just a few years ago while putting hundreds of military officers and other opponents on trial for conspiring against Turkish democracy. In a remarkable about-face, Erdogan is now emulating the ruthless tactics of previous authoritarian rulers at the expense of Turkey’s evolution as a liberal state.

Like many of his secular predecessors, Erdogan has reverted to waging an all-out war against radical Kurdish separatists, the PKK. He is dramatically expanding the once discredited National Intelligence Agency, which in years past recruited Mafia criminals and right-wing terrorists to murder Kurdish leaders, left-wing activists and intellectuals. And he appears to be forging an alliance with ultranationalist members of the National Action Party (MHP), who supplied many of the ruthless killers for those murderous operations.

These developments should alarm U.S. and European leaders. They are ominously anti-democratic trends in a country that once promised to meld the best of Western and Near Eastern traditions. They are also helping to drive Turkey’s secret alliances with Islamist extremists in Syria and its violent opposition to Kurdish groups that are leading the resistance to ISIS in that country.

Erdogan successfully cultivated a democratic image after his moderate Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), gained a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the November 2002 elections. Then in 2008, with public support for his party sagging, Erdogan oversaw the mass indictment of more than 200 former military officers, academics, journalists, businessmen and other opponents of the AKP.

The 2,455-page indictment alleged a vast conspiracy by members of an alleged “Ergenekon terrorist organization,” named after a mythical place in the Altay Mountains, to destabilize Turkish society and overthrow the government.

The alleged Ergenekon plot drew credibility from an all-too-real alliance of intelligence operatives, criminals and rightist terrorists exposed in the
aftermath of the so-called “Susurluk Incident.” A car crash in the Turkish town of Susurluk in 1996 connected one of the country’s leading heroin traffickers and terrorists with a member of the conservative ruling party, the head of the counterinsurgency police, and the Minister of Interior.

Subsequent investigations linked this “deep state” network to a former NATO program, sometimes known by the name of its Italian version, “Operation Gladio”, to foment guerrilla resistance in case of a Soviet occupation of Turkey.

In contrast to the legitimate revelations that grew out of the Susurluk affair, the Ergenekon proceeding at times resembled a Soviet show trial. A court handed down life sentences to a former head of the Turkish military and several top generals, the heads of various intelligence organizations, a prominent secular ultranationalist, secular journalists, and a prominent deputy from a secular opposition party, among others.

A separate proceeding, known as “Sledgehammer,” convicted more than 300 secular military officers of involvement in an alleged coup plot against the AKP government in 2003.

Critics accused the Erdogan regime of using the cases to neutralize its potential rivals as part of its broader suppression of political dissent.

“The intimidation and the number of arrests have steadily risen in the last 10 years,” Der Spiegel observed in 2013. “Many journalists no longer dare to report what’s really happening, authors avoid making public appearances and government critics need bodyguards. The anti-terrorism law is an effective instrument of power for the government as the supposed terrorist threat is an accusation that’s hard to disprove. It plays on a deep-rooted fear among Turks that someone is trying to destabilize and damage the nation.”

The two big trials that fanned that fear were based on falsified evidence and a politicized judicial system. The injustice was effectively recognized by Istanbul’s high criminal court in 2014 when it freed the former army chief of staff convicted in the Ergenekon case. In March 2015, a prosecutor admitted that evidence submitted in the Sledgehammer case was “fake” and 236 convicted suspects were acquitted.

However, just as Erdogan had used those two cases to purge the Turkish power structure of his secular critics, so he used the discrediting of those cases as an excuse to purge supporters of another rival, the exiled moderate Muslim cleric Fethullah Gâlen. Erdogan accused them of terrorism and of creating a “parallel state” to challenge his rule. The crackdown followed judicial actions and news leaks, attributed to Gâlen followers, that implicated Erdogan’s family
and supporters in high-level corruption. As the New York Times observed, Erdogan turned his back on those show trials “for the simple reason that the same prosecutors who targeted the military with fake evidence are now going after him.”

Now, in a complete reversal of his previous warnings about the dangers of the deep state, Erdogan is actively cultivating the very institutions that were at its core.

For example, the government is planning a 48 percent increase in spending for the National Intelligence Agency (MIT) in 2016, on top of a 419 percent increase over the past decade. The new money is slated to pay for construction of a big new headquarters building and to expand the agency’s operations.

According to Turkish expert Pinar Tremblay, “What we are observing here is a national intelligence agency that has become a prominent player in the decision-making process for Turkish politics. [MIT head Hakan] Fidan acts as a shadow foreign minister. He is present in almost all high-level meetings with the president and prime minister. It is an open secret that both the president and the prime minister trust Fidan more than any other bureaucrat.”

After MIT trucks were caught in 2013 and 2014 smuggling ammunition, rocket parts, and mortar shells to radical Islamic groups in Syria, Erdogan’s allies put police and other officials involved in the raids on trial for allegedly conspiring with Gülen against the government.

A recent report also suggest that Erdogan is also seeking support for his Syrian adventures from members of the National Action Party (MHP), sometimes known as the Grey Wolves. Once openly neo-fascist in ideology, the party figured prominently in terrorist violence in the 1970s and 1980s with backing from military and police officials. Mehmet Ali Agca, the terrorist who tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981, was a member of the Grey Wolves.

Members of a youth branch of the MHP are reportedly now fighting in Syria to support that country’s Turkish ethnic minority, the Turkmen, against Syrian Kurds. (The Turkmen are also being armed by the MIT.) At least one MHP notable was killed recently by a Russian bombing raid; one of the mourners at his funeral was the Turkish gunman who murdered the pilot of the Russian jet shot down by Turkey in November.

A leading Turkish expert on the Grey Wolves, journalist Kemal Can, says they are drawn to supporting the Turkmen less for ideological reasons than because of state recruitment. “I think that, directly or indirectly, the state link is the decisive one,” he said. “The ultranationalists are the most fertile pool for
secret operations.”

Many members of the MHP are also drawn to the cause by their violent opposition to the Kurds and other non-Turkish minority groups.

After PKK militants attacked Turkish soldiers and police last summer and fall, Grey Wolves attacked 140 offices of the HDP, the Peoples’ Democratic Party which supports the rights of Kurds and other minorities, according to the leftist Turkish journalist Sungur Savran, setting many offices on fire:

“Ordinary Kurds were hunted on the streets of the cities and towns of the Turkish-dominated western parts of the country, intercity buses stopped and stoned, and Kurdish seasonal workers attacked collectively, their houses and cars burnt down, and they themselves driven away en masse.”

Such polarizing violence suited the needs of Erdogan’s AKP party, which wants to eliminate the HDP from parliament in order to gain the super-majority it needs to revise the constitution to enhance Erdogan’s powers as president.

Last September, intriguingly, one leader of the ultranationalist MHP urged restraint against ordinary Kurds, saying that “equating the PKK and our Kurdish-origin siblings is a blind trap” that would ensure wider ethnic conflict. Further, he claimed that groups acting in the name of the Grey Wolves to attack Kurds were actually “Mafia” fronts for President Erdogan.

His claim about the “Mafia” may have been more than metaphorical. Following Erdogan’s recent denunciation of hundreds of Turkish academics as “traitors” for protesting the government’s vicious crackdown on Kurdish communities, an ultranationalist organized crime boss who was briefly imprisoned for his alleged role in the Ergenekon conspiracy but is today chummy with Erdogan promised to “take a shower” in “the blood of those so-called intellectuals.”

So there you have it: The Erdogan regime has revived an alliance of intelligence officials, right-wing ultranationalists and even organized criminals to crush Kurdish extremism, to cow political critics, and to support radical Islamists in Syria.

The Erdogan regime, once the great scourge of alleged anti-democratic conspirators, has recreated the Turkish deep state as part of a menacing power grab. It represents a direct threat not only to Turkish democracy, but to Turkey’s neighbors and NATO allies, who will bear the consequences of Erdogan’s ever-more risky, erratic and self-serving policies.

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