



## **Turkish Militias and Proxies**

*Erdoğan has created a private military and paramilitary system. He deploys this apparatus for domestic and foreign operations without official oversight.*

**Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Jonathan Spyer**

*Drs. Yanarocak and Spyer are senior fellows at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS).*

### **Executive Summary**

Since 2010, centralized authority has collapsed in many Middle East states, including Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. States able to support, mobilize, and make use of irregular and proxy military formations to project power enjoy competitive advantages in this environment.

Under President Recep Tayypp Erdoğan and the AKP, Turkey seeks to be the dominant regional force, projecting power over neighboring countries and across seas. In cooperation with a variety of bodies, most significantly the SADAT military contracting company and the Syrian National Army, Turkey has developed over the last decade a large pool of well-trained, easily deployed, and effortlessly disposable proxy forces as a tool of power projection, with a convenient degree of plausible deniability.

When combined with Turkish non-official, but governmentally directed and well-established groups such as the Gray Wolves, it becomes clear that Erdoğan now has a private military and paramilitary system at his disposal.

The use of proxies is rooted in methods developed by the Turkish "deep state" well before the AKP came to power. Ironically, the tools forged to serve the deep state's Kemalist, anti-Islamist (and anti-Kurdish) purposes now serve an Islamist, neo-Ottoman (and, once again, anti-Kurdish) agenda.

Erdoğan deploys this apparatus for domestic and foreign operations without official oversight. Syria was the first place where he put this into action. Proxies subsequently have been employed in Libya and in Nagorno Karabakh to further Turkish foreign

policy goals. There are now reports of Turkish-controlled Syrian fighters being deployed to Qatar.

Thus far, the proxies have delivered modest achievements for Turkey in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan. As such, all Middle Eastern countries should pay close attention to the nature of this system, the advantages it conveys, and its potential vulnerabilities.

This study is the first attempt to systematically trace the roots, development, structure, and deployment of Erdogan's "unofficial" military frameworks. It also is the first foreign policy/national security study to be published jointly by an Israeli and an Emirati think tank. The authors hope it will be the first of many such joint research initiatives.

## **1. The Turkish Deep State**

Turkey's irregular warfare capabilities have become a key instrument of national policy. To understand the foundations of this practice, it is necessary to trace the roots of this system back to the days when the Turkish military ran the state.

Given their role in the foundation of the modern Turkish nation-state, the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri or TSK) always have regarded themselves as the true guardians of the Republic. This perception was shaped mainly due to their role as saviors of the nation in the decade of conventional wars<sup>1</sup> waged until 1922 (the end of the Turkish war of independence). The founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, acted as the commander in chief of the TSK, but his resignation from the army and becoming a civilian president did not result in role-reduction for the TSK. A symbiotic relationship was formed between the TSK and the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), which was initially the sole party in Turkey. The CHP was perceived as the political organ of the army.

Harmony between the army and the civilian state ended in 1945 when Turkey's transition from a single party authoritarian state to a multi-party democracy took place. Turkey wanted to be accepted as a member in good standing in the Western camp that attained victory in WWII. In the 1950 multi-party elections, the CHP lost power for the first time to the opposition Democrat Party (DP) of Adnan Menderes.

The generals, who considered themselves the core of the state, witnessed the transition of power to DP, which had no formal relations with the TSK. This event led to some estrangement of the TSK from the political sphere, pushing the military into the "deep state" structure. The senior brass of the TSK developed a culture of covert networking, remaining loyal to "the state" rather than to the "elected government."

Driven by the imperative of loyalty to the state's interests as defined by the "deep state," the TSK engaged in military coups to redress policies that were perceived by them to be threatening the state. In the eyes of the TSK, these military takeovers were just "fine tunings" aimed at protecting the state against elected civilian governments. Due to the many such interventions, the concept of a "deep state" (Derin Devlet) grew into a recognized political term in the lexicon of Turkish politics.

In 2007, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was asked in an interview whether he was aware of the existence of the Turkish "deep state." Erdoğan replied that the "deep state" was a dangerous phenomenon that democratically elected public servants should obliterate; and he traced its origins back to the Ottoman Empire. Erdoğan referred to members of the deep state as a "gang" who act in accordance with

its own "holy values" in ways that may even lead to violation of the country's laws. He decried the fact that deep statists tag their opponents as "internal enemies."

The term 'Internal enemies' was frequently mentioned after it had been used in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's farewell letter to the Turkish army. (It also is engraved on the wall of his mausoleum in Ankara). He warned the army about "internal enemies." For Atatürk and his followers these were Islamists and separatist Kurds. The emerging democracy allowed Islamists and Kurds to acquire public positions in the state.

Deep state elements established assassination squads against Leftists and Kurds who were viewed as dangerous. The police investigated such political murders, but nobody ever was brought to justice. The police investigations were conducted half-heartedly, and the judiciary tended to shield state officials. The lack of law enforcement and punishment encouraged deep state elements to continue their activities.

Such behavior legitimized covert operations for "the sake of the state" and deeply affected Turkey's political culture. The Islamist AKP, a former adversary of the deep state, took control of the Turkish state structure in the 21st century and inherited the modus operandi of the deep state in dealing its own adversaries. Moreover, the AKP has further upgraded elements and functions of the Turkish deep state and employed them against external adversaries.

## **2. The Special Operations Unit of the Turkish Armed Forces**

After the Second World War, Turkey decided to join the Western camp to defend itself from its historical nemesis Russia. Turkey decided on June 30, 1950 to participate in the Korean War (1950-1953) and was subsequently admitted into the NATO alliance in 1952.

NATO asked the member states to establish special operations units that could organize armed resistance in case of Soviet invasion – modeled on the anti-Nazi resistance and the role of the British SOE and the American OSS in supporting it. All NATO countries including Turkey formed special units. Immediately after the 1971 coup d'état, Turkey established a special unit under the name "Department of Special Warfare" (Özel Harp Dairesi, ÖHD). This entity, also known by the nickname "Gladio,"<sup>2</sup> was tasked to carry out covert operations for the state and make necessary preparations to cope with the Russian invasion threat. Many Turkish historians believe that Gladio became Turkey's main instrument for carrying out "dirty business" such as assassination, kidnapping, sabotage, etc. Turkish leftists and Kurdish political activists were targeted. Thus, the use of non-formal units became a feature of Turkish political and military culture.

While the ÖHD was formally part of the TSK's structure, few knew about its existence. For instance, former Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit heard about the ÖHD for the first time in 1978. Then-Turkish Chief of Staff Semih Sancar asked for funding after the Americans cut the budget of the special unit. Later in a TV interview Ecevit admitted that he was astonished when he heard about the existence of such a unit. As leader of the Turkish left, Ecevit's amazement grew when he found out that members of the rival rightist "Gray Wolves" also were recruited to the unit.

## **3. The Gray Wolves**

The Gray Wolves (Bozkurtlar, also known as the "Idealist Hearths" – Ülkü Ocakları) were founded in 1965 by the Turkish nationalist Alparslan Türkeş. The group is

considered the youth branch of the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). The ideology of the organization is Pan-Turkic, seeking to unify all Turkic peoples into a single nation stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China.

The main task of the Gray Wolves was fighting against perceived threats of Communist subversion, as well as the threat of PKK, left-oriented Kurdish separatism. This organization differed from other youth movements associated with political parties by its paramilitary training. According to the official webpage of the Gray Wolves, its training camps offered military training and provided a "Turkish-Islam Synthesis," a worldview based on ethno-nationalist religious education, supported by "sports like" and cultural activities. Accordingly, Gray Wolves were raised as "nationalist conscious" citizens. They are indoctrinated to perceive the state as a holy entity and to dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of the state. Their hall of fame figures includes Mehmet Ali Ağca, who attempted to murder the pope.

The involvement of Gray Wolves in Turkey's Special Operations Unit increased significantly after the 1980 military coup. Apart from preparing for a possible Soviet invasion, Turkey also experienced assassinations of its diplomats in Europe by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). As the number of assassinations began to climb, coup leader and army Chief of Staff Kenan Evren decided to launch a campaign against the ASALA. In this framework many members of the Gray Wolves, including those who were in exile in Europe or in prison, were recruited for covert missions against ASALA, with a promise that their criminal records would be erased.

According to former Gray Wolves member Kartal Demirön, retired Turkish army generals trained most of the Gray Wolves. The Gray Wolves did not limit their scope of activity only to Armenians, but also targeted the Turkish left and the Kurdish supporters of the PKK. During the late 1980s and the 1990s, the Gray Wolves also were recruited into the ranks of Turkey's Gendarmerie's Intelligence Unit (JITEM) which was accused of political assassinations against Kurdish political activists and businessmen.

Turkish use of Gray Wolves against the Kurdish PKK became known through an infamous car accident in Susurluk in 1996. The then-former vice police chief Hüseyin Kocadağ, Member of Parliament Sedat Bucak, and one of the most famous Gray Wolves, Abdullah Çatlı – were killed. An inquiry revealed that the three worked for the "Special Forces Command Post" (also known as "Special Bureau"). Moreover, it turned out that the Turkish minister of interior, Mehmet Ağar, knew about their activities.

Given these accusations and due to public pressure, Mehmet Ağar resigned and was sentenced in 2002 to five years in jail. However, he was pardoned and released one year later. In an interview before entering prison Ağar said that "the state told us come and then we came. The state told us go and we went. I never caused any harm to the state. I see this imprisonment sentence as national service."

Further investigations revealed the structure of the Special Warfare Unit. At that time, the unit was said to have approximately 700 personnel, including elements of the

Gray Wolves. According to a former agent of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT), Mahir Kaynak, these members were on active duty within the ranks of the army, police, and the MIT. Besides the abovementioned "state officials," Kaynak emphasized that the state enjoyed the services of nationalist right-wing mafia leaders. Kaynak added that the state ignored the crimes of the mafia due to their contribution to national security. Nationalist mafia bosses such as Alaattin Çakıcı and Sedat Peker appear to be the most prominent examples of this phenomenon.

Following the revelations, Turkey adopted an ambivalent stance towards the Gray Wolves and the mafia bosses. A 1997 National Security Council meeting tagged the Gray Wolves and mafia bosses as a potential threat to state security. Yet, Turkey did not outlaw the Gray Wolves. The group lived on as a youth organization of the MHP. Moreover, Turkey continued using the Gray Wolves. For instance, upon the declaration of an alliance between MHP and AKP in 2015, ultra-nationalist mafia bosses, especially Sedat Peker, became more active in domestic politics and acted to deter and intimidate leftist opposition voices such as the "Academics for Peace" group.

Gray Wolves also were employed for Turkish purposes abroad. For instance, many members of the movement took part in the first (1994-1996) and the second (1999-2000) Chechen Wars, fighting together with the Chechens against the Russian army. According to many (but unconfirmed) reports, they also provided weapons and ammunition to the Chechens.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the movement entered a period of inaction. However, this trend came to an end in 2015 when Thailand decided to extradite a group of Uyghur refugees to China. Pictures of the handcuffed Uyghurs infuriated the Turkish public, and the Gray Wolves activists organized demonstrations. They even stormed the Thai consulate in Istanbul. On August 17, 2015, a Hindu shrine in Bangkok was bombed, killing 20 innocent civilians. The Thai police arrested Gray Wolves member Adem Karadağ (alias Bilal Mohammed) and charged him with responsibility for the attack.

With Turkey's decision to intervene militarily in Syria in 2011, the Gray Wolves joined the fighting alongside Syrian Turkmen, who are considered part of the Pan-Turkic family. Again, as in Chechnya, Gray Wolves focused on fighting the Russians in "Bayır Bucak," the Turkmen dominated area. With Turkey's open support, Gray Wolves began to enroll in new Turkmen armed brigades that were named after the Ottoman sultans such as Sultan Murat, Abdulhamid Han, Mehmet the Conqueror, and Yavuz Sultan Selim.

Unsurprisingly, recruitment was public via the Turkish propaganda machine at home, especially via by pro-government newspapers such as *Yeni Şafak* and *Star*. The papers asserted that these groups were in fact defending the Turkmen homeland which is inherited from the Ottomans. Indeed, Gray Wolves and their sister organization, Alperen Hearths, left their mark in the Syrian Civil War when their member, Alparslan Çelik, killed Oleg Peshkov, the Russian pilot who ejected from a jet that was shot down by the Turkish F-16 in November 2015.

The involvement of Gray Wolves in Syria under state sponsorship illustrated the bond between Erdoğan's Neo-Ottomanism and MHP's head Devlet Bahçeli's Pan-Turkism. This became even clearer in 2018 when Erdoğan began to use the Gray Wolves hand sign during his election campaign, while calling for "One nation, one motherland, one flag, and one state."

Thanks to social media, this nationalist aspect of Turkish political discourse has penetrated the Turkish Diaspora in Europe. On November 2, 2020, during the last armed confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the highly politicized and radicalized branch of the Gray Wolves in France vandalized the Armenian genocide monument. Given the ongoing tension between Turkey and France, Paris decided to ban the Gray Wolves, accusing the group of being "extremely violent and inciting hatred against Armenians and French authorities."

Erdoğan slammed the French decision. German lawmakers then demanded to enact a similar ban on the group in Germany, where it was running under an umbrella organization called "Federation of Democratic Idealist Turkish Associations of Germany (Almanya Demokratik Ülkücü Türk Dernekleri Federasyonu, ADÜTF). It is estimated that in Germany alone there are 11 thousand Gray Wolves members. In fact, in Germany and Austria there are 270 registered Gray Wolves "hearths" (centers). Thus, a ban in Germany could also trigger Austrian action against the Gray Wolves.

Given its strict hierarchical organizational infrastructure, the Gray Wolves is controlled by the MHP in Turkey. Apart from new recruits, it seems that the younger members of this organization are sons or grandsons of older Gray Wolves. Membership passes from generation to generation. And the political alliance between AKP and MHP provides government shelter and support to the Gray Wolves, as well as certain legitimacy. While senior members of the group are on the MHP payroll, most members are volunteers.

Ankara's open support for the Gray Wolves means that the organization is evolving from a marginal, radical, rightist group into one embraced by the Turkish state. It is an organization that is attracting right wing and conservative Islamist circles in the Turkish Diaspora.

#### **4. SADAT (International Defense Consulting Company)**

The SADAT International Defense Consulting Company (Uluslararası Savunma Danışmanlık Şirketi) was established in 2012 as the only privately owned defense consulting firm in Turkey. The company was founded by Brigadier General (res.) Adnan Tanrıverdi and 22 comrades in arms who all were expelled from the TSK due to their political Islamic tendencies.

The name SADAT is the plural form of the word السيد (Al-Seyid) meaning "notable" in Arabic, a choice indicating an Islamist orientation. The company's offices are in Istanbul. Its legal establishment was declared in the Turkish Registry Gazette on February 28, 2012 under the number 8015. Its logo indicates that the company's area of operation is the whole Muslim world, including European countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania. As the sole and leading provider of military training in Turkey, SADAT can be considered the continuation of the pre-Erdoğan period's "deep state" informal units.

The company's website summarizes its activities as the sole Turkish private enterprise that is providing defense consultancy and military training and equipment. To achieve this goal, SADAT provides clients with warfare packages and special operations training. This includes conventional training (land-naval-air, internal security) and unconventional training (ambush, raid, roadblock, sabotage, terrorizing, assassination, rescue, kidnapping, and operational techniques that can be used against street protests).

SADAT's website includes detailed information and criteria for candidates seeking to participate in a 16-week-long training program. According to the Turkish press, SADAT's clients include the Turkish Police forces special unit (Polis Özel Harekat - PÖH, also known as "Esedullah" - The Lions of God); the newly armed neighborhood watchmen (Bekçi) that act as Erdoğan's revolutionary guards against any potential threats in the streets; and Erdoğan's special presidential guards, also known as the "Reinforcements" (Takviye).

Company founder General Tanrıverdi was a member of Turkey's Special Warfare Unit and of Northern Cyprus' Civil Defense Organization. During his military service General Tanrıverdi also served as a lecturer at the Turkish Armed Forces military academy, where the current minister of defense Hulusi Akar was his student. However, after the military intervention in 1997 (the post-modern coup) Tanrıverdi was forced to retire due to his political Islamic tendencies.

After expelled from the army, he joined an association called Defenders of Justice (Adaleti Savunanlar Derneği, ASDER). This organization was formed by 632 military personnel who were all ousted from the TSK, most of them due to their Islamist tendencies. Between 2004-2009 he became the chairman of ASDER. To function as a think tank and not only as an ex-army union, he founded the Justice Defenders Strategic Research Center (Adaleti Savunanlar Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Derneği, ASSAM). ASSAM began to submit proposals to the Erdoğan administration about the need for comprehensive restructuring in the TSK.

Tanrıverdi and Erdoğan have known each other since 1994 when both served in Istanbul, Erdoğan as mayor and Tanrıverdi as commander of Maltepe military base in the city. The two leaders forged a strong relationship.

Tanrıverdi was deeply influenced by US defense consulting firms such as Blackwater, and decided to establish SADAT. Within four years (immediately after the failed coup attempt in July 2016), he was nominated to be President Erdoğan's top military advisor. He then led a comprehensive overhaul of the army. Tanrıverdi sought to end the secularist educational tradition of the TSK. He shut down the military academies, which were strongholds of Turkish secularism, and replaced them with a National Defense University. This latter institution recruited students from the religious Imam Hatip schools.

Nevertheless, on January 8, 2020 Tanrıverdi had to resign because of a controversial speech at the third International Islamic Union Congress in December 2019, where he said:

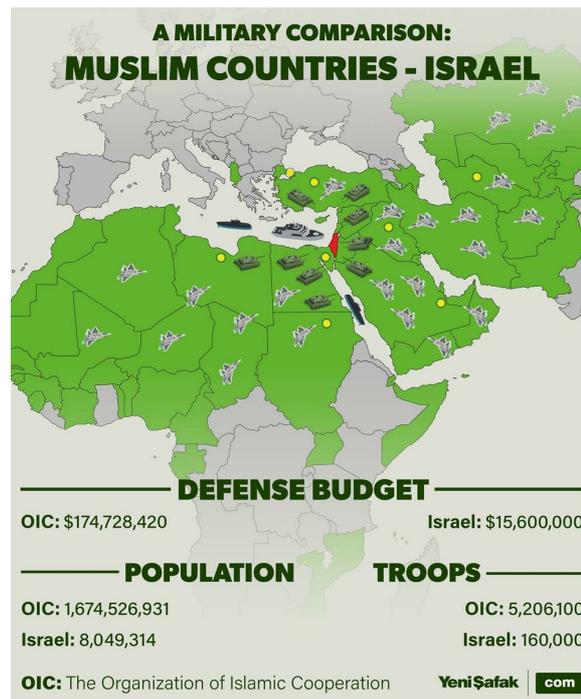
*“Will Islam ever unite? Yes. How will it happen? When the Mahdi<sup>3</sup> arrives. When does the Mahdi arrive? Only God knows. So, do we not have a duty? Should we not prepare the conditions for the Mahdi’s arrival? This is precisely what we are doing.”*

Tanrıverdi's statement was not a slip of the tongue. On SADAT's website, the organization, and Tanrıverdi personally, advocate the Pan-Islamic unity of Ummah ideal, while portraying the company as the platform for cooperation among Muslim states. SADAT envisions ways in which the Muslim states can become self-sufficient military powers.

Tanrıverdi's articles reveal that the Turkish general was deeply influenced by the Serbian-Bosnian conflict. He deeply believed in the need for a Pan-Islamic NATO style of military alliance against the "enemies of Islam." Tanrıverdi also called for an Islamic alliance against Israel to force Jerusalem to adopt a "just peace." He asked every Muslim nation state to donate tanks and other military equipment for an Islamic army to defend the Palestinians. Tanrıverdi even designed a plan for defeating Israel within eleven days.

Tanrıverdi's apocalyptic Pan-Islamic military alliance vision was presented and advocated by the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper (a pro-government voice) for the first time on December 11, 2020, a day before the Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in Istanbul that gathered to protest US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

*Yeni Şafak* also provided its readers an interactive map indicating the military bases that can be used against Israel during the so-called "feasible military operation." The details were taken from Tanrıverdi's articles.



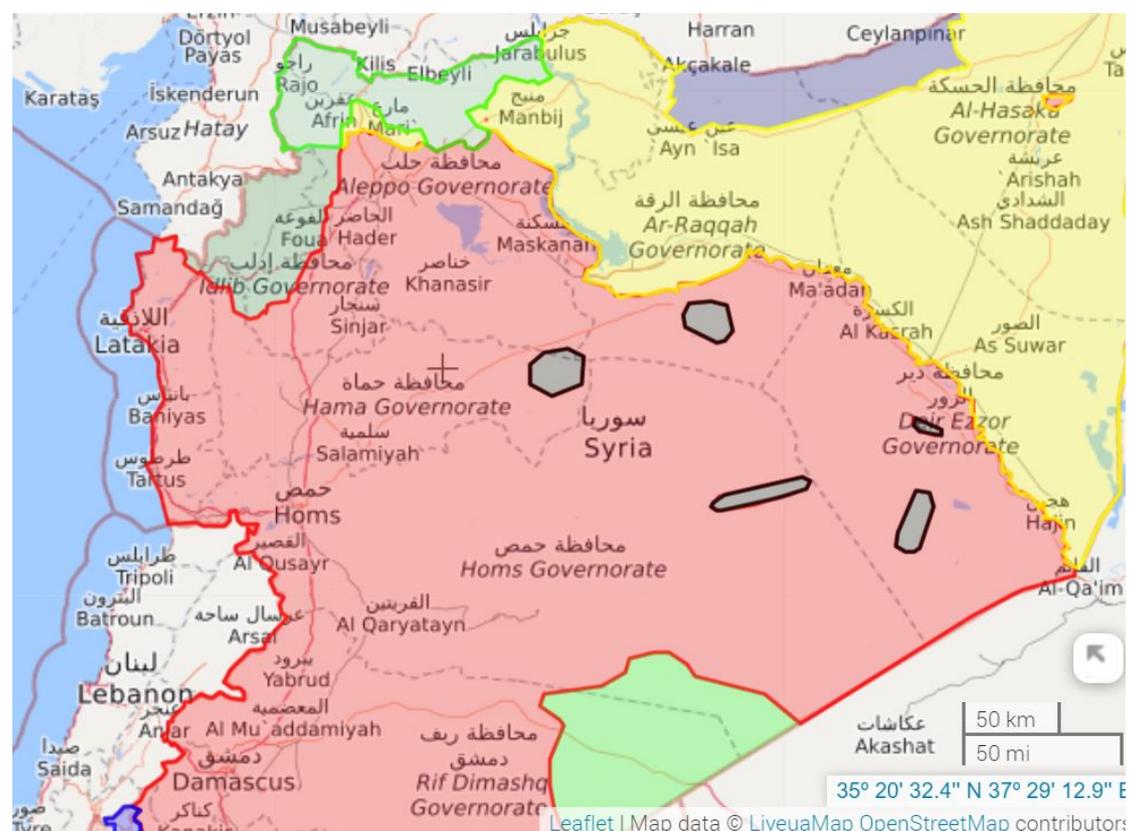
The organization caught the attention of the Israeli security establishment. In 2018, Israel's General Security Service (the Shin Bet) accused SADAT of transferring funds to Hamas. A Turkish academic, Cemil Tekeli, was arrested by Israeli security officers and accused of money laundering. Later, Tekeli's picture with Tanrıverdi also surfaced in the Israeli *Makor Rishon* newspaper.

### 5. Turkish Proxies in Syria: The NLF and Jaish al-Watani

Turkey was a crucial backer of the armed effort to topple the Assad regime from the beginning of the rebellion, in mid-2011. Prior to the uprising, Ankara had enjoyed

normal relations with Damascus. But the uprising took place in a context of a generalized advance of Sunni Islamist forces in the region, notably in Egypt and Tunisia. At that point, Turkey envisaged the potential emergence of a bloc of Sunni Islamist states that would form natural allies for Ankara. The Syrian uprising made Damascus a potential member of such an alliance, in the event of rebel victory. This tempting prospect caused the Turkish government to throw its weight behind the rebellion.

From early 2012 onwards, the armed rebels made use of Turkish soil to transfer weapons to their strongholds in northern Syria. Today, the remaining areas of northern Syria outside the control of either the Assad regime or the US-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are all under Turkish supervision or security guarantee to one degree or another. There are three such areas:



1. The area between Tal Tamr and Ain Issa, conquered from the SDF by the Turkish military and Syrian Islamist militias associated with it, in October/November 2019. This area is today under Turkish control.

2. The area from Jarabulus in the east to Jandarjis to its south west. This area constitutes the former Afrin canton of the SDF and was conquered by Turkey and associated Islamist militias in January-March 2018. This area is today under Turkish control and undergoing demographic changes in a manner reminiscent of Northern Cyprus. Ethnic cleansing of the Kurdish population has taken place. 137,000 people were displaced from their homes because of the 2018 operation, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. A process of ‘Turkification’ appears to be under way in this area, including the changing of street names, elimination of all Kurdish symbols, use of Turkish currency and opening of Turkish language educational institutes at both school and higher education levels.

3. The area of Idlib Province from Jandarisi southwards to Jisr al-Shughur, which is controlled by the so-called 'Salvation Government,' a structure of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Salafi jihadi militia. This area is not under direct Turkish control, but Ankara maintains around 80 military and observation points around this area. These points act as a de facto security guarantee for the HTS controlled area, since the Syrian regime, if it wished to move against HTS, would need to directly engage the Turkish Armed Forces. There are between 12-20,000 Turkish troops currently deployed in this area. Thus, the remaining insurgency in Syria today consists of forces partially or entirely under Turkish control.

Except for HTS, which remains outside direct Turkish supervision, and Haras al-Din, a more radical splinter group which rejected HTS's abandonment of open ties to al-Qaeda, all other rebel forces in northern Syria have been absorbed into two Turkish-supported structures: The National Liberation Front (NLF), Al-Jabhat al-Wataniya il-Tahrir, and the Syrian National Army (SNA), al-Jaysh al-Watani. The first of these is a Turkish-sponsored amalgam of 22 rebel militias. The group's formation was announced in May 2018. The dominant militias within it are Ahrar al-Sham, a powerful Salafi grouping, and Faylaq al-Sham, a militia ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The group numbers approximately 70,000 militiamen.

As to the SNA, also sometimes referred to as the 'Turkish Free Syrian Army' (TFSA), it is the product of a Turkish attempt to transform several Syrian rebel militias into a semi-regular military force. It consists of 22,000-35,000 fighters. Organized into seven 'Legions,' and further sub-divided into divisions and brigades, the force answers nominally to the 'Syrian Interim Government' of 'President' Anas al-Abdah and his 'Minister of Defense' General Salim Idris. In practice, this force is universally acknowledged to be answerable to Turkey. The fighters are trained, equipped, and paid by Ankara, and when deployed in such operations as Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, (and of course in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh) they constitute an infantry element of a Turkish-directed operation under Turkish command, without an independent command structure of their own or the ability to take decisions independent of the Turkish leadership.

This dependence on Turkey was graphically demonstrated on October 4, 2019, when the heads of the Syrian Interim Government announced the merger of the NLF into the SNA, and their support for an upcoming Turkish offensive into SDF-controlled eastern Syria (Operation "Peace Spring"). Neither the military commanders of the SNA, nor the leaders of the NLF were aware of the merger, which appears to have come at the direct order of the Turkish authorities. Hence, today the NLF officially constitutes a part of the SNA. The combined force now numbers around 100,000 fighters. The merger completes the process of the absorption of all significant Syrian Sunni militias under direct Turkish command, except for HTS, Haras al-Din (which has in fact attacked Turkish forces) and ISIS.

## **6. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and Turkey**

HTS is the only insurgent organization today that maintains relations with Turkey, but which remains outside of the control of the Turkish military chain of command in Syria. Turkey's relations with HTS are complex and ambiguous. Officially, Ankara designated HTS as a terrorist organization on August 31, 2018, following similar designations by the US and EU. HTS emerged in 2017 from the fusion of Jabhat al-Nusra, the former Syrian franchise of al-Qaeda (until it split from the latter in 2016),

with a number of other Islamist militias, namely Ansar al-Din, [Jaysh al-Sunna](#), [Liwa al-Haqq](#), and the [Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement](#).

In practice, Ankara has avoided confronting the organization, which remains the de facto governing authority in southern Idlib, under Turkish protection. This is despite Turkey's clear commitment in the framework of the 2018 Sochi agreement with Russia to rid Idlib province of terrorist groups. Partly, this may be attributed to Turkey's awareness of the undoubtedly heavy cost in lives among its own soldiers, should any such attempt be made (an attempt by the SNA to confront HTS, without major Turkish support, would almost certainly result in the SNA's defeat). But Turkey's relations with HTS have long gone beyond merely an uneasy tolerance.

Strong evidence [suggests](#) that HTS maintains relations with MIT (the Turkish intelligence agency), with the defense company SADAT, and with IHH, the quasi-governmental Islamic relief agency which has been active in northern Syria and the border area throughout the Syrian civil war.

Regarding MIT, [leaked](#) documents from a 2015 court case show that the organization was shipping weapons across the border to a Jabhat al-Nusra controlled part of Syria south of Adana. Trucks controlled by the MIT containing the weaponry were stopped by the Turkish Jandarma at the Ceyhan toll gate on January 9, 2014. The Turkish authorities later covered up the affair, banning Turkish media from reporting on it. Jandarma personnel involved in the search were arrested and charged with espionage.

Regarding IHH, it has worked closely and without concealment on relief issues with HTS and with other Islamist rebel groups in its various iterations since the beginning of the war. HTS personnel have freely crossed the border back and forth since the beginnings of the conflict. HTS members escort Turkish personnel through south Idlib at the present time.

Regarding SADAT, the agency was engaged from the start of the war in the Turkish government's support for and training of rebel fighters from a variety of organizations, including the forerunners of HTS. According to a 2012 report in the oppositionist *Aydınlık* newspaper, SADAT established several bases in the Istanbul and Marmara region for the purpose of carrying out this training. This report was one of the first in the Turkish media to identify the existence of SADAT, and its role as a trainer of proxy forces for Turkey.

The report names the Ulaşlı camp on the Marmara region in the Gölcük district of Kocaeli as one of the facilities used by SADAT for the training of Syrian fighters. This facility, formerly maintained by the Turkish Navy, is officially named the "Naval Forces Command Ulaşlı Special Education Center Command" and has a capacity for 600 personnel. According to *Aydınlık*, SADAT personnel working in these facilities transport Syrian fighters from Syria in groups of 300-400 people for training. Activities on this scale cannot possibly be undertaken without the knowledge, and hence the tacit support, of MIT and the government.

The role to be played by the SADAT-trained fighters in Turkish national strategy first became apparent in Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016. This operation marks a watershed in Turkey's utilization of Syrian fighters. Prior to it, Turkish support was afforded to the Syrian insurgents because of the shared political goal of toppling the Assad regime. In Euphrates Shield, for the first time, the Syrians were used as a direct instrument of Turkish policy in pursuit of the Turkish goal of denying the Syrian Kurds contiguous territorial autonomy along the Syrian-Turkish border.

SADAT founder Tanrıverdi called in an interview on Akit TV (December 14, 2015), for the establishment of autonomous Turkmen and Sunni Arab areas along the border. Tanrıverdi said: "We need to put forward our minimum requirements, which are a sine qua non. There should be an autonomous Turkmen region, if there are to be autonomous and separate federative structures. The Kurdish region should not be unified and must be kept separate. Between [Kurdish-controlled points] there should be a corridor that will connect us to Aleppo. It [the corridor] should be a Sunni region, an Arab-Sunni region."

With significant adjustments, this resembles what was subsequently established, utilizing the Syrian fighters of the NLF and SNA as the core infantry force in Turkey's operations "Euphrates Shield" and "Olive Branch". The adjustments, as compared with SADAT's vision are several. First, the areas conquered by Turkey in these operations are not, except for HTS controlled southern Idlib, autonomous. Rather, they are Turkish controlled. Second, Turkey failed in maintaining a foothold to rebel controlled Aleppo city. Indeed, the entire city returned to regime control in late 2016, because of Russian and Iranian efforts that Turkey was not strong enough to oppose.

Evidence has emerged to suggest that the General Command of the Turkish armed forces was opposed to Erdoğan's plans to carve out autonomous zones in Syria, preferring that Turkey act, if at all, as part of a US led coalition against ISIS. Following the coup attempt in July 2016, Erdoğan purged many officers opposed to a large-scale incursion into Syria.

The recruitment, training and establishment of a large, Turkish-controlled Syrian force enabled Ankara to carry out three extensive operations into Syria: "Euphrates Shield" in 2016, "Olive Branch" in 2018, and "Peace Spring" in 2019. This, at minimal cost in Turkish lives, and with the built-in 'alibi' that what was being created by the incursions were zones administered by Syrian clients of Turkey, rather than by Turkey itself.

Thus, Syria was the first and prime example of a new method of proxy warfare, using local mercenary forces recruited with the involvement of a quasi-governmental agency (SADAT). These forces, and these methods, were then employed in Libya to further Turkish foreign policy goals – a project vastly more complex from both a logistical and a geo-political point of view than the relatively straightforward deployment of forces in neighboring Syria.

## **7. Turkish Intervention in Libya (via SADAT and Syrian Proxies)**

Turkey is closely aligned with the Tripoli-based "Government of National Accord" led by Fa'iz Sarraj in Libya. In December 2019, reports began to appear on Syrian opposition websites of Syrian fighters being deployed by Turkey in Libya to defend the GNA areas against the advancing forces of General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Turkey denied the reports. Subsequently a large volume of evidence confirming the deployment and revealing its details has emerged. In 2013 SADAT itself signed an agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA). In the framework of the agreement SADAT committed to construct a military sports facility and a vehicle maintenance structure.

The recruitment of the fighters for Libya was conducted on the ground by SNA personnel, and took place in the three Turkish controlled areas in northern Syria, and among refugees in southern Turkey. A relative lull in the fighting with the regime

made it possible to divert fighters elsewhere. Senior Turkish officials later explicitly confirmed the presence of SNA fighters in Libya. On February 21, 2020, in a statement to reporters, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that “Syrian teams” from the SNA were carrying out missions in Libya. In a speech in the Turkish city of Izmir on February 22, 2020, Erdoğan once again confirmed the presence of SNA personnel in Libya.

According to Syrian opposition sources, Turkey’s Ministry of Defense directly contracted SADAT and an additional company called Abna’a al-Umma to manage the recruitment of fighters in the framework of the SNA, and in coordination with the Syrian Interim Government. The companies recruited the fighters and were responsible also for the preparation of the official documents that authorized them to enter and leave Turkey legally to Libya, in addition to fixing employment contracts of three to six months for the fighters.

A fighter of the Jabhat al Shamiya, one of the component militias of the SNA, told a Syrian opposition website that “the fighters were put in a hotel in Turkey until they were issued Turkish IDs. They checked out of Turkey as Turks, not Syrians. Some were transferred by plane and others by ship... Also, promises of getting a salary of \$3,000 a month were fake, and they only got \$1,200.”

According to Syrian opposition sources, the militias responsible for the recruitment and handling of the fighters were the First Corps of the National Army, the Sultan Murad Division, the Mu’tasim Division, and the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat). These groups registered individuals wishing to fight in Libya. They then coordinated the process of transporting fighters from Syria to Turkey through communication with SADAT and under the supervision of the Turkish army. Members of the Levant Front, the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd, and the Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam also travelled to Libya under the supervision of Mu’tasim.

According to a Syrian opposition report, “Fighters are transported from Syria to Libya through two routes. Some fighters present in Libya revealed they are gathered at the Hawar Kilis military crossing and from there transported by buses to Turkish territory. In Turkey, they are dropped in camps in the Kilis region until their documents are completed, and then airlifted from Gaziantep International Airport to one of Istanbul’s airports.”

“The second route consists in taking the road from Syria to Antakya, the air from Antakya to Ankara and finally to Libya on Afriqiyah Airways.” The Libyan Wings airline is mentioned by other sources as one of the commercial companies used to transport fighters from Turkey to Libya. Regarding transport within Turkey, the fighters are taken by road from the Kilis crossing to Gaziantep airport and there flown by A400 Turkish military aircraft to Istanbul.

In Libya itself, SADAT works closely with Fawzi Boukatif, a Palestinian Islamist and former commander of the Martyrs of 17 February Brigade, a militia which fought Gaddafi. SADAT, together with Boukatif, is responsible for the deployment of the Syrian fighters in coordination with Tripoli’s army.

Regarding the number of Syrian fighters present in Libya, according to a report by the US military’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), presented to the US Office of the Inspector General (OIG) on August 28, 2020, there are approximately 5000 Syrians fighting with the GNA in Libya. The report, according to Jane’s Information group notes that “Syrians fighting for the GNA are paid and supervised by ‘several dozen’

military trainers from a Turkish company called Sadat, which also trains GNA-aligned militias.” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, meanwhile, puts the number higher (at 17,000) and claims that 471 Syrians have been killed in Libya.

Syrian fighters played a significant role in the GNA’s Operation Peace Storm launched on March 25, 2019, which saw GNA and allied forces ousting the LNA from the entirety of the Tripoli area, and then pushing east to recapture a string of coastal towns. The role of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAVs was also vital in this campaign. These systems reportedly played a role in the destruction of three Russian Pantsir-S1 systems deployed with the LNA.

### **8. Turkish Intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh (via Syrian fighters)**

Turkey strongly supported the decision by Azerbaijan to begin in September 2020 a military campaign intended to wrest back the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia. Evidence rapidly began to accumulate that Ankara was maintaining a similar pipeline of Syrian client fighters to the battleground, as had been the case in vis Libya. The components and tools of this strategy were familiar. Again, official denials from Ankara and Baku were rapidly belied by reports from the battle zone.

Once again, the Syrian fighters were recruited by the SNA, in cooperation with SADAT. The fighters were offered monthly fees of \$1,500-2,000 for agreeing to serve in the southern Caucasus. The contracts, again, were for three to six months. The main recruitment centers were in the cities of Afrin, Al-Bab, Ras al-Ain, and Tel Abyad. The route taken out of Syria, according to fighters’ testimony, was also similar. Fighters crossed the border at Kilis and were then transported to the Gaziantep Airport. From there, SADAT-chartered A-400 transport aircraft flew them to Istanbul Airport, and from there they boarded flights to Baku, Azerbaijan.

The specific SNA-associated militias used for this deployment differed from those who provided the manpower for Libya. The main pools of manpower for this deployment were the Sultan Murad, Suleyman al-Shah, Hamza and Failaq al-Sham brigades. The first two of these brigades draw their support from ethnic Turkmen populations in northern Syria, and hence may have been assumed to have had a greater natural affinity for the Turkic Azeris than would Syrian Sunni Muslims of Arab ethnicity.

But in its general contours, the deployment in Nagorno-Karabakh resembled the blueprint established in Libya. In both cases, the role of SADAT was paramount in the recruitment, organization, and transport of the fighters; the SNA was the chief pool of manpower; and the deployment took place alongside the use of specialists from the official Turkish armed forces.

### **9. Turkey and Qatar**

Turkey and Qatar are engaged in a strategic partnership based on a common orientation in support of Sunni political Islamism and shared adversaries. The first Turkish troops arrived in Qatar in late 2015, under the terms of an agreement for military cooperation signed in 2014. Cooperation has sharply increased, however, since the dispute between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other in 2017. Several high-level visits have taken place, alongside war games and joint training. Today, Turkey maintains a force of around 3000 military personnel in Qatar. In December 2015, a plan was announced for the construction of a Turkish base in Qatar, the first permanent Turkish military facility in the Gulf area. In March

2018, an agreement was signed for the building of an additional permanent Turkish naval base in the north of Qatar, to include a training facility.

Cooperation in the defense sector between the two is also flourishing. Qatar has signed an agreement to purchase TB-2 armed drones, which have performed well in Iraq, Libya, Azerbaijan, and Syria. BMC, a Turkish combat vehicle producer, Aselsan, and the Anadolu shipyard have also signed major deals with Qatari firms over the last two years.

The Turkish presence in Qatar makes Ankara a significant player in the Gulf for the first time. Given the assertive pattern of Turkish behavior elsewhere, this is causing concern in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However at present, the deployment appears to be conventional in nature, with no irregular and proxy element of the kind which characterized the Turkish interventions in Libya, Syria and Azerbaijan.

### **Conclusion**

Even though President Erdoğan could crush the dominance of the TSK, the "deep state" political culture is still evident in Erdoğan's empire. However, it has been turned from a tool of Kemalist and secularist repression into an ambitious vehicle for the neo-Ottoman agenda, and as tool meant primarily for internal matters to a tool for achieving external ambitions.

Today, President Erdoğan's AKP and its MHP ally rule the Turkish state without any significant opposition. The two parties dominate all state organs and mechanisms, including the deep state and its covert tools. To strengthen his position at home, Erdoğan continues to pursue a hardline Islamist, nationalist, and increasingly blunt neo-Ottoman stance in Turkey's foreign policy.

Apart from relying on the TSK for Turkey's extra-territorial military campaigns, Erdoğan uses the Gray Wolves, SADAT and other elements in the implementation of his agenda. These organizations are tasked with securing and guaranteeing Erdoğan's rule in Turkey against any coup attempts. But they also serve Erdoğan's ambitions abroad.

Turkey's activities in Europe, Syria, and Libya serve as concrete examples of this. The cooperation between SADAT and the Syrian National Army has created a new situation in which for the first time Turkey possesses a large pool of available, easily deployed, and easily disposable foreign manpower as an important tool of power projection; a tool that provides a degree of plausible deniability.

When combined with Turkish non-official but governmentally directed groups that are well-established such as the Gray Wolves, it becomes clear that Erdoğan now has a private military and paramilitary system at his disposal. He deploys this apparatus for domestic and foreign operations without official oversight.

The implications of this are manifold. Rigorous further study of this worrying development is called for.

---

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, the First and the Second Balkan Wars (1912-1913), World War I (1914-1918), and the Turkish war of independence (1919-1922).

<sup>2</sup> Gladio means sword in Latin. It was the nickname of the Italian special operations unit. Later this term was used to describe all special units in NATO.

<sup>3</sup> Mahdi is the Islamic counterpart of the Messiah in Judeo-Christian theology.