

Has Turkey Become a Fascist State?

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Seventy years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, fascism has reemerged with a vengeance. This resurgence can be seen all over Europe and the former Soviet bloc, perhaps most notably in Ukraine where Nazism masquerading as nationalist patriotism has effectively embedded itself in the political and military institutions of the country, all with the backing of the United States and European Union. From racist rhetoric and xenophobia in Western Europe, to torch-lit parades with fascist iconography in Greece and Ukraine, this virulent disease is once again infecting the body politic of the European continent.

However, just to the East, and with very little fanfare from sociologists, political scientists, and the international Left, Turkey has quietly been transformed into an aggressive, and deeply reactionary, country where civil and human rights are trampled under the weight of so-called “nationalism.” Under the leadership of first Prime Minister, and now President, Erdogan, Turkey has eschewed its once deeply held desire to be accepted as a liberal democracy in the community of European nations, and instead chosen the trajectory of regional hegemony abroad and fascist thuggery at home.

Now, it should be said at the outset, that the term fascism can take on many meanings, particularly in light of its historical development and context. One must also be careful not to use the term haphazardly at the risk of robbing it of its true meaning. Indeed, it would not be fair to say that Turkey in 2015 is as fascist as Ukraine or Germany under Hitler; such a description would be grossly irresponsible and not at all accurate.

However, a close analysis of Turkey in the ‘Age of Erdogan’ does reveal a country that has given over to violence as a political tool, repression and censorship as standard government practice, and sponsorship of terrorism as foreign policy. If it hasn’t already earned its fascist moniker, it may well be on its way.

War on Civil Liberties and Human Rights



Although it is mostly ignored by the western corporate media, owing in no small part to Turkey’s position as a key NATO member state, Erdogan’s government has increasingly clamped down on civil liberties, most especially freedoms of speech and the press. Though the US and Europe browbeat Russia and the non-western world endlessly about alleged infringements on precisely these civil liberties, their Turkish partners have made such repression into standard policy.

A case in point is the persecution, intimidation, and potential prosecution, of journalists who have the audacity to report stories considered embarrassing or damaging to Erdogan and his government. Take, for instance, the [public calls for the prosecution and imprisonment for](#)

[life](#) of Can Dündar, Editor-in-Chief of the Turkish daily Cumhuriyet after the publication released [video footage](#) and transcripts of wiretaps confirming the widespread allegations that Turkish trucks, ostensibly loaded with humanitarian supplies, were actually filled with arms bound for terror groups fighting the Syrian government, and that those trucks were operated by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Despite calls from [Human Rights Watch](#) (an organization deeply hostile to the Assad government) and other organizations demanding that Erdogan's government drop the investigation, Ankara seems to be pushing forward with the intimidation and repression of journalists.

Indeed, the internationally respected Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [reported](#) that in 2012 and 2013, Turkey was the world's leading jailer of journalists. Although the number of journalists imprisoned decreased in 2014 with the release of some with pro-Kurdish sympathies, the repression has taken on new forms and new targets, many of whom the Erdogan government broadly accuses of being "agents of the Gülen movement," - the international network of schools and business ventures run by former Erdogan ally, and now rival, Fethullah Gülen. This accusation has become the boilerplate pretext for the repression of a variety of media figures and outlets in Turkey, essentially anyone who challenges Erdogan policies vis-à-vis Syria, corruption, censorship, and a host of other issues.

In fact, in December 2014, the Turkish police [raided the offices of the Zaman newspaper](#), one of the most popular in the country, alleging that Zaman was responsible for "launching an armed terror organization." The authorities detained the Zaman Editor-in-Chief Ekrem Dumanlı, as well as the head of the Samanyolu Media Group, Hidayet Karaca, along with a producer, scriptwriter and director.

The Turkish Journalists Association (TGC) and the Turkey Journalists' Labor Union (TGS) released a [joint statement](#) in condemnation of the raids and the ongoing repression of journalists by the Erdogan government, noting that

"Almost 200 journalists were previously held in prison on charges of being a member of a terror organization, violating their right to a fair trial. Journalists are now being detained once again. These developments mean that freedom of the press and opinion are punished in Turkey, which takes its place in the class of countries where the press is not free."

International organizations too expressed their outrage at this blatant violation of freedom of the press. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and its regional group the European Federation of Journalists (EFL), [stated](#) that, "We are appalled by this brazen assault on press freedom and Turkish democracy...One year after the exposure of corruption at the heart of government, the authorities appear to be exacting their revenge by targeting those who express opposing views...This latest act demonstrates that the authorities' contempt for journalism has not diminished."

Of course, Ankara's war on freedom of speech, and the media generally, is not relegated to established media outlets such as Zaman and Cumhuriyet, but also to citizen media and social media as well. In response to the leaking of recordings on Twitter documenting corruption among Erdogan cronies and political elites within his Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdogan attacked the social media platform, and his government immediately moved to [restrict access to Twitter](#). Far from a national security threat, Erdogan was upset that social media provided a window into the naked corruption and criminality of his regime

which has armed terrorists abroad while lining its pockets and suppressing dissent at home.

Responding to the leaks, Erdogan even went so far as to suggest a total ban on all social media sites, including Facebook and YouTube, [saying](#) that “The international community can say this, can say that. I don’t care at all. Everyone will see how powerful the Republic of Turkey is.” This sort of megalomaniacal rhetoric has become the norm for Erdogan, who sees himself as less a president and more a sultan or absolute monarch.

In fact, earlier this year Erdogan’s government shut down social media in the run-up to an important election for the second time. As usual, the government, speaking through the courts, argued that the social media platforms spread “propaganda for an armed terrorist organization” after images of a prosecutor taken hostage, and later killed, were spread online. But of course, that act provided a convenient pretext for shutting down social media networks hostile to AKP and used for mobilizing young people against the ruling party.

It should be noted that restrictions on social media sites are not, in and of themselves, necessarily all negative. In fact, countries do have the right to control their own cyberspace as a means of defending against manufactured, color revolution-style destabilizations which utilize social media as a very potent weapon. But unlike China for instance, which has a systematic and consistent control over its cyberspace, Turkey has used such control sporadically, only employing it at the convenience of the government. Rather than a coherent policy rooted in law, it seems to be at the whim of the president-cum-dictator.

Nationalist Protesters or Fascist Thugs?

Aside from the repression of journalists and ordinary citizens, Turkey has also witnessed the rise of ultra-nationalist, fascist groups that have inflicted ethnic-based violence on a number of occasions. Earlier this month, members of various fascist groups attacked a number of Kurdish political sites and Kurdish-owned businesses in cities around the country. In the capital of Ankara, a gang of young men [attacked the headquarters of the People’s Democratic Party \(HDP\)](#), a pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey. The fascist thugs threw rocks at the building before entering it and setting it ablaze.

Such an attack is very much in the tradition of the Blackshirts and Brownshirts of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany respectively, and is eerily reminiscent of the attack on anti-fascist protesters in Odessa, Ukraine on May 2nd, 2014 in which scores of innocent men and women were killed by Ukrainian Nazis. Indeed, the torching of the building provides a ghastly parallel between the attacks, and suggests a complicity of law enforcement which seems to have done next to nothing to either prevent the attack or intervene once it had begun.

Similarly, in the province of Kirsehir members and supporters of the Nationalist Movement Party (also known as the Grey Wolves), a fascist political formation that espouses a virulently Turkish supremacist position, [attacked](#) an HDP office. In the city of Kirsehir, their violent thugs torched at least 20 Kurdish-owned businesses in what can only be described as ethnically motivated hate crimes and terrorism. So, while decrying the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization, and waging war against it and its supporters, both militant and peaceful, Erdogan’s government is perfectly willing to look the other way at violence committed by its own fascist rank and file.

Turkey: State Sponsor of Terrorism

It is no secret that Turkey has been one of the most vocal advocates of regime change in Syria, with President Erdogan repeatedly [calling](#) for Syrian President Assad's ouster. In leading the charge for the overthrow of the Syrian government, Turkey has hosted a number of terrorist groups that have been at the forefront of the war against Damascus. In this way, Turkey has been the crucible of jihadi mobilization. And without getting into a semantic argument about the differentiation between Wahhabi extremism and fascism, suffice it to say that both ideologies espouse similarly supremacist and violent outlooks in their quest for dominance and power.

In 2012, the [New York Times](#) confirmed that the CIA was arming and financing anti-Assad forces from the Turkish side of the Turkey-Syria border, using long-standing connections with the Muslim Brotherhood to do so. However, thanks to the information that came out in Turkish courtrooms and on the front pages of the same papers being targeted by the Erdogan government, it has also come to light that Turkish intelligence has been [arming and resupplying the terror groups](#) such as Nusra and others.

But far from solely a covert destabilization war, Turkey has been directly involved on the ground in Syria both in active military and support roles. In fact, transcripts of wiretaps obtained by [Cumhuriyet](#), and presented in Turkish courts, along with shocking [video footage](#), have confirmed what numerous eyewitnesses have stated: Turkish security forces have been directly involved in shelling and support operations for Nusra front and other jihadi groups in Syria. This confirms the eyewitness accounts from Kassab and other cities that Turkish helicopters and heavy artillery were used in support of Nusra and the other terror groups during both 2014 and the current campaign.

Does the sponsorship of terrorism make Turkey fascist? No. Of course not. Were that to be the sole criteria, then every western country would be categorized as "fascist," thereby leaving the term utterly devoid of meaning, let alone its historical cachet. However, terrorism is the means by which Erdogan seeks to remake the region in his own image, rebranding the Middle East as a neo-Ottoman sphere of influence and hegemony. Such monomania is fairly typical of megalomaniacal leaders like Erdogan, be they of the Bonapartist or fascist stripe.

However, the political repression at home, coupled with foreign policy belligerence and a complete disregard for the rights and welfare of all but his own followers, places Erdogan squarely in the fascist camp. One could make the argument that this is overstating the point, and that Erdogan should not be mentioned in the same breath as Hitler or Mussolini, or even the political leaders and oligarchs of Ukraine today - that would be a fair point as there are clear differences.

However, if you're a journalist sitting in a Turkish prison cell, or looking over your shoulder every day on your commute home, the difference is negligible. If you're a Syrian child who has watched your father and brother be killed by terrorists using arms provided by the Turkish government which continues to call for the destruction of your country, the distinction is irrelevant.

Put simply, whether Turkey is already fascist, on the road to fascism, or simply shifting to the right, the grim reality is that the Republic of Turkey of previous decades - the Muslim nation and NATO member that was to be the beacon of democratic liberalism and pragmatism in a volatile region - is now but a distant memory.

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