Turkey’s German Spy Network

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s spy network in Germany puts additional stress on the relationship between the two European powers.

The Munich Security Conference is generally a good forum for meeting decision-makers in the realm of international security policy. This February, it was business as usual: Britain’s Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson mingled with US Senator John McCain and Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko, while UK Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon sat next to his Turkish counterpart Fikri Isik at a panel on the future of NATO. What was different this time only became known later: Hakan Fidan, chief of Turkey’s security service (Milli İstihbarat Teskilati, or MIT), casually handed a list of names to Bruno Kahl, the head of Germany’s foreign intelligence agency (Bundesnachrichtendienst, or BND). The names were of Turkish and German citizens in Germany that MIT had been spying on, and Fidan demanded that Kahl hand the list on to Germany’s domestic security agency to take further action.

Nobody seems to know for certain why the Turkish superspy deemed it necessary to deliver a typed list of names by hand to his German counterpart during a security conference. But what has been bothering German politicians, security experts and concerned citizens for quite a while is the fact that, in Turkey, ‘national defence’ now seems to have taken on a different meaning. His repression has increased markedly and his stance on his opposition for years, but the Istanbul election, which was tainted by accusations of vote rigging. Erdoğan has been cracking down on his opposition for years, but his repression has increased markedly since the attempted coup last summer; about 100,000 people have been purged, including many academics and school directors who are being accused of supporting the Gülen movement.

Was Gülen really behind the attempted coup in Turkey? Kahl does not think so. In an interview with the news magazine Der Spiegel in March 2017, he stated that ‘he was not convinced that Gülen was behind the attempted coup’. The UK Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee also stated:

While some of the individuals involved in the coup may have been Gülenists, given the large number of Gülenist supporters and organisations in Turkey, it does not necessarily follow that the Gülenists were responsible for the coup or that their leadership directed the coup.

What is very concerning for German and Austrian authorities is the fact that individuals who have been overheard criticising Erdogan face arrest when they travel to Turkey. ‘We have to protect our Turks’, said Peter Pilz in an interview with the author. Pilz, a politician of the Austrian Green party, is responsible for the Green’s security portfolio and has long researched what he calls the ‘Turkish Stasi’:

It cannot be the case that someone has a chat during a visit to his hairdresser in Austria or Germany, is then reported by one of Erdogan’s informants and when this individual travels to Turkey a few months later, is arrested at the airport for being a Gülen supporter.

Pilz claims to know of about fifteen arrests so far. According to the Austrian politician, MIT has 200 informants in Austria; only the Russian FSB is said to have a tighter network of informants.

Both Germany and Austria have had large Turkish minorities since the Gastarbeiter (‘guest workers’) policy of the sixties and seventies, when Turkish citizens were invited to come and join the work force. The German and Austrian governments also had Anwerbeabkommen (Agreements for Recruitment) with other countries, such as Italy and Spain. But the booming German economy needed more cheap workers. Turkey offered them. The very term Gastarbeiter indicates that these individuals were not expected to stay permanently. The first agreement stated that they should return.
after two years. But many did stay, and most of the second generation have German or Austrian citizenship. Of the 3.2 million Turkish Germans, about 1.5 million still retain Turkish citizenship and are eligible to vote in Turkish elections.

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Germany has now started three investigations to get a grip on Erdogan’s spy network in Germany. The first two focused on imams and DITIB officials who spied on private Turkish individuals; the third investigation centres on Halife Keskin, a high-ranking official of the Turkish religious organisation Diyanet. Diyanet has apparently called on Turkish diplomatic offices around the world to collect and send in information about the Gülen movement and its supporters.

According to Pilz, the ‘Turkish Stasi’ mostly works in Germany, Austria, Belgium and France – countries with big Turkish minorities. But he claims to have also seen documents which indicate that the Turkish secret service has instructed its officials in the embassy in London to spy on fellow Turks in the UK too. Pilz says that on one document MIT has listed all institutions critical of Erdogan’s policies and with any connection to FETO as ‘propaganda instruments against Turkey’. These include educational centres and mosques in London and other British cities.

But for no one in Europe has the row over Erdogan’s spy ring more significance than for Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel, who faces national elections on 24 September. One of the cornerstones of her current administration is a deal with Turkey over the mostly Syrian refugees fleeing from their war-torn country to Europe. Merkel brokered the deal after Germany had accepted one million refugees in 2015 and pressure on Merkel for her Willkommenspolitik policy had increased. In exchange for €3 billion in aid and a contingent of registered refugees to be distributed within the EU, Erdogan agreed to keep three million refugees in Turkey and prevent them from taking the life endangering route via boat to Greece.

Only 5,700 refugees have been resettled from Turkey to the EU since the deal was signed in March 2016. Most EU countries, including the UK, have kept their doors practically shut, leading Turkey to consider tearing up the deal with the EU. Merkel has so far kept the channel of communication between Berlin and Ankara open. As Turkey is also a NATO partner and is situated in a geographically crucial location between Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, the West cannot afford a breakdown of relations with the increasingly authoritarian Turkish president.

**Merkel rejected Erdogan’s offer to host the NATO summit 2018 in Turkey**

Second, Merkel grew up in East Germany under a real dictatorship with an overreaching security service, the Stasi. Many East Germans are still traumatised by the experience of finding out, years later, that friends and family members, pressured by the regime, had betrayed their trust and spied on them.

As such, it is likely that Merkel has particularly strong feelings about Turkey’s spying efforts in Germany. Even if Erdogan can always use Turkey’s NATO membership as his trump card in his dealings with the EU, he had better be careful. Turkey’s economy needs healthy relations with the EU. And, besides Merkel, there are not many friends left in Europe.

**The cancellations of rallies in Germany led Erdogan to accuse Merkel of ‘fascist actions’ reminiscent of the Nazis**

But recent developments have strained relations further. During the Turkish referendum campaign, Germany and The Netherlands cancelled speaking engagements for Turkish ministers of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in their respective countries. Erdogan had sent his ministers to campaign for him. The cancellations of rallies in Germany led Erdogan to accuse Merkel of ‘fascist actions’ reminiscent of the Nazis.

At the NATO summit on 25 May, the German chancellor and France’s new president Emmanuel Macron demanded that nationals from their countries held in custody in Turkey be released. Merkel also rejected Erdogan’s offer to host the NATO summit 2018. Merkel is under pressure from all sides, but has so far kept her countenance towards the Turkish regime.

But there are two things Merkel feels particularly sensitive about. First, it is never a good idea to call any German a Nazi without profound reason – especially not a German chancellor who has fought long and hard to keep Turkey’s president within the bind of EU cooperation.