

## Washington Report on Middle East Affairs

January/February 2006, pages 37, 41

### Talking Turkey

#### Turkey's "Deep State" Surfaces in Former President's Words, Deeds in Kurdish Town

By John Gorvett

When a former president and seven-time prime minister of Turkey says that the country has not one state but two, many naturally sit up and take notice.

When he says this a few days after nationwide riots, sparked by an alleged plot by one of those states to murder a long list of its opponents, it becomes clear that in Turkey, the nature of the state is no abstract political discussion.

Indeed, with two dead and the rioting spreading from the Iranian border to districts of Istanbul, the remarks by Suleyman Demirel made in a mid-November interview with NTV television had a certain urgency to them as well.

"It is fundamental principle that there is one state," Demirel noted—but added, however, "In our country there are two."

Demirel, who was president of Turkey from 1994 to 1999, led a string of governments in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, including one brought to an abrupt end in 1980 by a military coup.

"There is one deep state and one other state," he elaborated. "The state that should be real is the spare one, the one that should be spare is the real one."

On Nov. 9, in the southeastern town of Semdinli, few would have disagreed with Demirel's assessment.

Around lunchtime, eyewitnesses claim, a white "Dogan" car, registered in the central Anatolian city of Konya, drew up near the Umit, or "Hope," bookstore.

The store was run by Seferi Yilmaz, who is widely thought to have been a sympathizer of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the ethnic Kurdish guerrilla organization that has been fighting Turkish troops for some 20 years now in order to realize its aim of Kurdish independence. There is no doubt that Yilmaz had served 15 years in prison for alleged PKK membership.

Reportedly, what happened next was that one of the car's occupants threw a bomb into the bookstore, located in a busy shopping area. The device exploded, killing Yilmaz and seriously wounding another man. The bomber then took flight and headed back for the car. However, the crowd pursued the suspect and surrounded the vehicle. A tussle then ensued, and the occupants of the car reportedly opened fire, killing another man and wounding four others seriously.

The police then arrived, and arrested the car's four occupants, taking them away to a nearby police station. But by this time members of the crowd had broken into the vehicle, allegedly discovering several AK-47 rifles and a Turkish Gendarmerie Intelligence (JITEM) ID-card in the trunk. There was also reportedly a "hit list" of other targets.

**"The state that should be real is the spare one, the one that should be spare is the real one."**

Reportedly, many in the crowd also recognized the car's other occupants as plainclothes JITEM officers—claims later borne out as the police prepared to prosecute the four men they had arrested.

Three were JITEM NCOs, while the person who allegedly carried out the bombing was a PKK “confessor.”

Kurdish groups and human rights organizations have in the past often described how such “confessors”—captured PKK members—sometimes are given the chance to go free or take a lesser punishment in return for betraying other PKK members, or even for carrying out attacks against them.

The discovery that the bombing had apparently been an operation of JITEM—one of the most notorious of the undercover security services operating in Turkey—sparked fury among the local, mainly ethnic Kurdish population. Rioting ensued for several days, and spread to other Kurdish communities across the country.

The story also broke in the Turkish press, with allegations that the attack revealed yet again the existence of the “deep state.” It was this dark force to which Demirel subsequently referred.

Defining the “deep state” is not so easy, however. Some argue that it is a hangover from the Cold War, when Western powers sought to establish a network of armed groups that would stay behind in countries that might have fallen to the Soviet bloc. While these groups were then abolished in most countries when the Soviet Union collapsed, the theory is that in Turkey this never happened. Instead, the group continues to operate, an unofficial underground army tied to organized crime and a bevy of corrupt politicians, police and bureaucrats.

### **Politics Abhors a Vacuum**

A wider view of the “deep state,” however, and one that is not uncommon, sees it as a product of Turkey’s weak central state.

Perhaps one way of demonstrating this is to look at the state’s response to the Semdinli incident. The government in Ankara, with the support of the opposition, quickly pushed a bill through parliament setting up an official enquiry. The prime minister himself, Recip Tayyip Erdogan, made a surprise visit to the town and swore that the perpetrators of the bombing would be punished, while also calling for calm and an end to the rioting.

However, some also remembered that Erdogan had visited the southeast’s regional capital, Diyarbakir, back in September and caused great hope of some progress in addressing the region’s considerable problems. Recognizing the existence of the Kurdish issue for the first time, he received strong praise from local Kurdish leaders for doing so.

Since then, however, little if anything has happened. Indeed, many commentators remarked in Semdinli that the prime ministerial delegation looked particularly lost during their visit, perhaps overwhelmed by the strangeness of the situation in which they found themselves, as people in the crowds that had come to see them began to chant complaints and even abuse.

Returning to Ankara from Semdinli, the government came in for further attack—this time from the Turkish military.

A Nov. 24 meeting at the prime ministry with military officials, called to discuss “terrorism,” ended with politicians retreating from their earlier enthusiasm for a full investigation in Semdinli. The military also criticized the politicians for linking the incident to the “deep state,” stressing instead that the PKK—and Kurdish groups across the border in northern Iraq—should have been held responsible.

In the southeast, many will interpret this as another indication of Ankara’s weak political ability to really affect what is going on in the region. The real powers, many ethnic Kurds say, are the military, the police, the gendarmerie and JITEM, along with an array of tribal armies, village guards, other intelligence services and secretive death squads. The “deep state” is all these people,

many in Diyarbakir would argue, rather than some Cold War-era hangover. This interwoven pattern of interests will also resist attempts to democratize the southeast—or, for that matter, Turkey in general—as any such attempt would immediately undermine its power.

Dealing with this second state will therefore likely be the biggest challenge facing the government in the years ahead, as its efforts to match European Union standards in particular oblige it to try and unify the mechanisms of power, bringing them under electoral control.

Semdinli may therefore just be the start of a very long—and bumpy—road.

*Jon is Gorvett is a free-lance journalist based in Istanbul.*