

Turkey's Overflowing Influence: Religious Freedom Impact

The 2016 coup attempt in Turkey ushered the nation into a new chapter, one which includes a significant emphasis on foreign policy and military expansionism. Countries previously part of Turkey's former Ottoman Empire, and countries with a significant Muslim population, are specifically targeted. The unique religious freedom concerns that were once contained within the boundaries of Turkey's borders are now found wherever Turkey has gained influence. Equally concerning is how Turkey has leveraged those religious freedom issues of neighboring countries for Turkey's own benefit, at the expense of the local population.

In short, Turkey's military expansionism has had the impact of exploiting people, exporting persecution, and enabling the perpetrators to commit even more egregious actions. If this is how Turkey treats vulnerable communities outside of its own borders, then how much more so within.

It is also worth noting that much of the media produced by Turkey's humanitarian and military partners often includes [Grey Wolf](#) symbolism, particularly the salute. An extremist movement connected with the MHP party and youth cultural centers, the Grey Wolves are well-known for violently targeting ethnic-religious minorities and have been involved through many of most egregious violations of religious freedom.

Exploiting People:

Turkey has positioned itself not only as the regional superpower, but also as a major influential player who dictates the terms for how those countries outside of the Islamic world interact with Muslim-majority nations. By the end of 2019, Turkey had evolved so that they had contributed "*more than a quarter of the entire world's humanitarian aid*", [according](#) to the Borgen Project. Turkey's Foreign Ministry confirms on their website that the reason for this rapid expansion into humanitarian aid is because of the ongoing crises within Turkey's regional vicinity.

However, it is also clear that the escalation of many regional crises occurred in large part because of Turkey's expanding military activities. Turkey is also the world leader in hosting refugees, a situation that predates their recent military expansion, but which has become a key negotiating point impacting the outcome of multiple conflicts.

For example, just days before the Taliban gained control of Kabul, Afghanistan, Turkey's President Erdogan extended an invitation for the Taliban to visit Turkey. This followed an earlier statement by President Erdogan that "*Turkey has nothing that contradicts their beliefs.*" Such a validation from arguably the most influential Islamic country within the region further empowers the Taliban. On the day of Kabul's fall, the son of the Taliban's founder was [quoted](#) saying, "*Turkey is a country that hosts many Afghans and that we want to build close relations with. We consider Turkey an ally and not an enemy.*"

In separate interview, the Taliban [explained](#), "*Our entire infrastructure has collapsed. We will rebuild Afghanistan in all areas and we need Turkey the most to do that. Turkey is a very important actor for us.*"

It's a respectable and strong country in the world and has a special place for the Muslim community. Turkey's bond with Afghanistan can't be compared with any other country. I'm saying this clearly; As the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, we need Turkey's friendship, support and cooperation the most."

In addition to contributing to the Afghan crisis, Turkish authorities also manipulate refugee crises. As a local example, the Bolu municipality [attempted](#) to capitalize on the opportunity, with the council approving a proposal to charge refugees higher fees for utilities (like water).

A similar sentiment permeated the national level. On one hand, accusations swirled that Turkey's ruling party was seeking monetary rewards from Europe for receiving Afghan refugees. On the other hand, nationalist sentiment against all refugees hit a new level across the country. For example, hundreds of people poured into the streets of Ankara and targeted Syrian refugees in what some [described](#) as "a wave of xenophobia that resembled a pogrom." While the Syrian incident was sparked by something unrelated to Afghanistan, it did reflect just how poorly national sentiment has developed towards refugees.

The conflicts that Turkey contributes towards worsens humanitarian conditions. When people attempt to flee, they often have nowhere to go except Turkey. But once there, they face exploitation at best. At worst, their lives continue to be threatened.

The highly Islamic language which permeates and often justifies these situations pushes religious minorities into further vulnerability. Turkey worsens crises under the name of Islam. Then Turkey makes it clear that help comes with conditions. While this challenges all refugees, non-Muslims are at a particular disadvantage.

Exporting Persecution:

SADAT is an international defense consultancy incorporated in 2012 with the [mission](#) "to establish a Defense Collaboration and Defense Industry Cooperation among Islamic Countries to help the Islamic World take the place where it merits among Superpowers by providing Strategic Consultancy, Defense and Security Training and Supply Services to Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces of Islamic Countries."

It is the only privately owned defense consulting firm in Turkey, and its logo indicates that its operational area is the Islamic world. SADAT's founder Adnan Tanriverdi was previously forced out of the TSK during the late 90s because of his political Islamic positions. However, he was nominated as President Erdogan's top military advisor after the failed 2016 coup. During his tenure, he successfully ended the secularist education of the TSK and replaced it with a National Defense University who recruited from Imam Hatip schools. He was resigned in December 2019 after commenting at the International Islamic Union Congress, "Will Islam ever unite? Yes. How will it happen? When the Mahdi 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."

Media outlet Yeni Akit allows SADAT's Chairman to further [explain](#), "So, why are Islamic countries in disarray? Shouldn't Islamic countries also establish unity? It is naturally necessary. And if this is not established, the problems we experience in the regions of Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya are entirely due to the lack of unity. The solution to all problems is the unity of Islamic countries."

Multiple government institutions have cited Turkey as being a major transit and financial hub for terrorists. Documentation is also increasing about Turkey's support of terrorists abroad. However, SADAT's role in this is only just beginning to be understood. While some observers had noted SADAT activities before 2020, the religious freedom implications became extremely apparent during the 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The [UN reported](#) that, *“According to ‘Kommersant’ news agency, the recruitment of FTFs is being conducted in Ankara-controlled territories in the north and northwest of Syria by employees of the private military company SADAT with the assistance of field commanders of the Syrian National Army (SNA). The main recruiting points allegedly operate in the cities of Afrin, Al-Bab, Ras al-Ain, and Tel Abyad. The FTFs, with the help of Turkish transport companies, are transported to the city of Sanliurfa (Turkey), 40 km from the border with Syria.”*

“Further, the mercenaries are retransferred to the conflict zone by SADAT charter flights. It is noteworthy that the head of SADAT company is Adnan Tanriverdi, the former chief military aide to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to some sources, this company is fully funded and supported by the Turkish government.”

SADAT's name again resurfaced in Turkey's next regional ambition: Afghanistan. The Institute for the Study of War [stated](#) in a July publication, *“Turkish private military company SADAT will likely lead the recruitment and transfer of Syrian mercenaries to Afghanistan in line with its past responsibilities in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. SADAT is a Turkish private security company founded by close Erdogan ally and retired Brigadier General Adnan Tanriverdi. SADAT has drawn domestic and international criticism for its reported role in training Islamist militias in Syria.”*

It is increasingly become clear that wherever SADAT is active, terrorism thrives. And where terrorism thrives, religious freedom suffers.

Enabling Perpetrators:

Although SADAT is increasingly a visible face of Turkish military expansionism, much of Turkey's influence is exerted through third parties who cloak the country's true intentions. Turkey's different institutions, including both SADAT and Turkish intelligence (MİT), actively support known terrorist groups in Syria. By maintaining a relationship with key leaders, Turkey can recruit mercenaries to provide infantry support during Turkey's global military activities.

The following individuals have been identified as a sample of those terrorist leaders supported by Turkey who also have deliberately contributed to the genocide of Christians and other minority groups. During the month of July, SADAT and Turkey courted these three militia leaders for a possible Afghanistan mercenary deployment. Since the fall of Kabul in August, it is unclear how Turkey will now utilize these militias.

Saif Balud (nicknamed Sayf Abu Bakr), Sultan Murad:

A Syrian Turkman from the town of Bizaa north of Aleppo, his career of militancy began in the Abu Bakr Sadiq Brigades as part of the opposition forces in the Syrian Civil War. At some point, Balud became connected to ISIS (how, when, and for what purpose remains unclear). It is rumored that he had become an asset for Turkish intelligence between 2013-2014, with the possibility that his identity had become “discovered” by ISIS, which could potentially explain his trajectory into a leadership position of the Turkish-backed Sultan Murad. A social media account under his name has a pinned tweet [saying](#), “(Turkey) You have been a shelter for all the oppressed, especially us Syrians. Whenever we were in trouble, you were with us. Now it's our turn. Like a place on earth! Wherever you want to stand, tell me, we will plant you there!”

Saif Balud has routinely served as one of Turkey’s primary contacts and leader of militias who intervene in foreign and local Syrian conflicts. During the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, [Balud](#) led or at least organized an expedition of 500 fighters as [mercenaries](#) for Azerbaijan engaging in genocide against local Armenian Christians. Some Syrian sources report that Balud had attended a July meeting of militia commanders and Turkish intelligence officials to plan for Turkey’s tentative recruitment of Syrian fighters through its SADAT contractor for an Afghanistan deployment. Balud was [reportedly](#) in attendance at Turkey’s Defense Industry Fair in August, where [SADAT](#) maintained a booth.

Muhammed al-Jassem, (nicknamed Abu Amsha), Suleiman Shah Brigade:

Before the civil war, Amsha was an Arab Bedouin tribe of alleged Turkmen origin and a farmer from Hama. Prior to the Turkish intervention in Syria, Amsha reportedly formed the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade from his tribe using Turkish funding in 2016. Throughout its history the Suleiman Shah Brigade has participated in every major Turkish offensive in Syria and prominently participated in Turkey’s foreign interventions abroad in Libya and [Nagorno-Karabakh](#). There are numerous accounts of rape, genocide, looting, and other human rights violations attributed to the Brigade, including many individual violations by its leader. Much discontent among the Brigade has been reported as a result of Amsha defrauding mercenaries. A defector [stated](#), “more than 1,000 fighters were defrauded, who have been recently sent to fight in Azerbaijan with decent salaries, where nearly 12 million Turkish liras were stolen, equivalent to 143 thousand U.S. dollars, of their salaries promised by the commander Abu Amsha.”

Nonetheless, local sources also report that Amsha was in attendance during a July meeting of militia commanders and Turkish intelligence officials to plan for Turkey’s tentative recruitment of Syrian fighters through its SADAT contractor for an Afghanistan deployment. He is sometimes locally [referred](#) to as “one of the godfathers of the operation of transferring mercenaries.”

Yasser Abdel Rahim, Commander of Majd Corps:

Originally from a village in the countryside of western Aleppo, Major Yasser Abdel Rahim of the Majd or “Glory” Corps has had a long career among Syrian opposition militias. Originally an



officer in the Sham Legion, Yasser was dismissed in 2018 and joined its close ally militia the Majd Corps as a field commander. The Majd Corps under Yasser's leadership has seen action in every major Turkish offensive in Syria, with Yasser himself [posting](#) photos on social media of his involvement in human rights abuses towards minorities and other vulnerable populations. He has participated in [mercenary](#) deployments to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. It is believed that Yasser attended a July meeting of militia commanders and Turkish intelligence officials to plan for Turkey's tentative recruitment of Syrian fighters through its SADAT contractor for an Afghanistan deployment.