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The impact of global media perceptions of Turkey’s intelligence and security approach towards the Syrian conflict

Craig Stanley-Adamson

Abstract

Much of the discussion surrounding the Syrian Conflict has focused on the militants on the ground and the international response, yet the important role of neighbouring intelligence agencies, such as the Turkey’s MIT, has been neglected. This paper will demonstrate how the global media have portrayed the MIT as Ankara’s key tool in achieving their regional geopolitical objectives. Such reports have detailed a variety of tactics used by Ankara and the MIT, from a clandestine approach of supplying certain rebel and extremist anti-Assad groups with arms and funding to the membership of an international coalition against Assad and extremist groups, all being coordinated simultaneously. In addition to media reports, these assertions are supported by two leaked conversations between top Turkish intelligence, military, and political figures and numerous useful eyewitness accounts from an array of militants, political opposition members, local populations and those accused of complicity in some of the alleged acts. By beginning to focus on Turkey’s intelligence and security approach towards the Syrian Conflict through these initial media and non-governmental accounts, it can be hoped that a clearer picture can be provided to scholars and political agencies on the motives and tactics used by Turkey as a regional actor. This will also pave the way for further analysis to determine more comprehensively the official role played by Turkey’s intelligence and security agencies vis-à-vis Syria.

Introduction

Entering its fifth year, Syria’s civil war has brought another round of refugee exoduses and bombing on extremist and militant groups by both Russian and NATO air forces. However, this is just another chapter in the ongoing era of Middle Eastern instability. Many of the powers involved in the conflict have a protracted history in the Levant region, but most cannot compare to the long-standing history of suspicion and anxiety shared between Turkey and Syria. This has culminated in a Turkish strategy to seek influence over a future Syria through alleged covert tactics in the first instance, led by Turkey’s National Intelligence Organisation (MIT).

This paper will set out why influence in Syria ranks high in Turkish interests and how Turkey’s Syrian approach, through the alleged use of the MIT, has been perceived by various international media and subversive and pressure groups to inform international debate. This paper will then show how through certain media reporting, at times giving platforms to subversive and pressure groups, has had a pervasive effect on Turkey’s tactical agenda within its wider Syrian strategy, particularly when that scrutiny interprets — rightly or wrongly — the role of the MIT. Much of this will add to and be supported by the academic work of Henri Barkey, and the contextual policy papers of Christopher Philips and Schanzer and Tahiroglu.
At this point, it is important to recognise the agendas of national and international media groups, particularly in a conflict where so many interests are at stake. For instance, Russia Today (RT) provide plentiful coverage of Turkey’s more niche tactics primarily as a result of Russia’s long-standing interest and feud with Turkey’s stance on international affairs. Similarly, those who have provided eyewitness and written accounts accusing Turkey of collusion with militant groups in Syria more often than not can be identified as the political opposition or lobby groups. Nonetheless, it is evident that these perceptions have impacted directly on Turkey’s Syrian policy, from having to open up further to its NATO allies regarding asset and intelligence sharing, to emphasising certain measures that counter the claims of collusion with extremist militants.

International media and willing eyewitness accounts suggest that Turkish tactics involved clandestine cooperation with some of Syria’s militant groups, including extremist Islamists. However, as a result of leaked conversation transcripts and an influx in terrorist attacks on Turkish soil, Turkey has begun to emphasise its role in the international coalition. Nevertheless, Turkish non-governmental campaign eyewitnesses accuse Turkey of juxtaposing this tactic with a continued tolerance of militant groups which exploit the border for personnel and resource smuggling, such as oil. Indeed, media coverage continued to hinder the country’s desired self-perception with various accounts describing Turkey as maintaining collaborative support, or at least a blind eye.

In assessing why this type of study is important, it is understood that relations between Turkey and Syria have been fractured since the beginning of their sovereign history, with only a few interspersing eras of goodwill. Such strains range from the territorial dispute over Hatay province, to Turkey’s dam-building projects across its south-eastern rivers. Security has been one of the key issues in this complex region, particularly for the Turkish state. In the past four decades, Turkey has witnessed a number of concerning conflicts across its borders, all threatening Turkey’s immediate sphere of influence. From skirmishes with Greece in the West, to the war to the north-east in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Western intervention in Iraq to its south-east, Turkey has long been conscious about the protection and integrity of its borders. Now, these fears have clearly been exacerbated by the developments in Syria, with the highly probable collapse of Bashir al-Assad’s government and the rise of numerous militia and extremist groups into the power vacuum that ensues.

The earlier reports concerning the role of the MIT at the heart of much of Turkey’s Syria policy followed the surprising allegations in early 2014 that Turkish funding to some of the armed militias fighting in Syria was made available through its intelligence service’s channels. Such media reports suggest that it was made apparent that Turkey was attempting to gain influence in Syria through these armed groups, some of whom would likely determine Syria’s future. However, from 2015 to the present day, it has been widely recognised that Turkey has increased its own involvement in the international campaign to rid their near southern border of such militant activity through the use of its own airstrikes, intelligence sharing and the permission for the U.S. to access its air base facilities following international pressure against Turkey’s covert approach.

Based solely on available media and sources, it is alleged that the MIT has been a key player in maintaining Ankara’s interests in Syria. According to recent media reports, this involved fuelling the current conflict in order, through illicit trading and smuggling foreign fighters, to oppose and depose al-Assad’s government, and garner favour vis-à-vis the parallel aspirations of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russian coverage of this particular issue comes at a time of heightened tensions between Moscow and NATO which suggests an attempt to manipulate the international agenda against increased Turkish involvement in Syria’s future. Similarly, the already established

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1 Schanzer, J. and Tahirolgu, M., Bordering on Terrorism: Turkey’s Syria Policy and the Rise of the Islamic State (Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, 2014). 6.
domestic political and media lobby opposed to the current Turkish government could be suspected of using the allegations against the MIT to highlight distrust towards Erdoğan.

The likely explanation for Turkish interest in Syria’s future can be traced to Schanzer and Tahiroglu’s “regional ambitions” assessment, in which Turkey seeks to move ahead of its rivals in the race to fill the void of regional leadership. For instance, in the mid-2000s Turkey was the second most influential power, after Iran, vis-à-vis the Assad regime, yet the considerable diplomatic and financial backing given to the Syrian opposition by Saudi Arabia and Qatar since the uprising presented the threat of post-Assad Syria slipping out of Turkey’s control. Ankara’s alleged decision to arm the opposition itself, alongside the Gulf States, gives weight to the argument of Turkey ensuring its own continued influence while checking its rival’s growing power. While this area has received much assessment, the importance of the role of Turkey’s MIT as a tool towards achieving the country’s longer-term goals across its southern border has widely been overlooked, leaving only unverified eyewitness and press accounts from the ground. Given the lack of extensive academic analysis, this paper suggests that further research should be commissioned to determine further the role of Turkey’s intelligence services in Syria.

Calm before the storm: relations before the Syrian Revolution

To fully understand the reasons for Turkey’s recent approach to the conflict within its southern neighbour, the shared histories of both countries must be considered. Since the creation of the modern Turkish Republic in 1922, Turkey has watched over the metamorphosis of Syria; from the short-lived Arab Kingdom of Syria to the French Mandate, and then from its declaration as a republic in 1938 before its full independence in 1946. This was followed by Syria’s involvement in the Arab–Israeli War in 1948, from which the resultant defeat contributed towards its political instability through to the 1960s.

Turkey has played its part in the tumultuous transition of Syria as a state. At the heart of Turkey’s immersion in the early years of Syria was the dispute over Hatay province. Yet, despite modern Turkey being born before many of the Middle Eastern nations we know well today, it is still important to note that the Hatay dispute came at a time of continuing democratic consolidation, and still did not have a fully empowered security institution of its own. This was one of modern Turkey’s first exercises in asserting itself and vying to claim its position as a Middle Eastern power.

The Hatay territory changed hands from the Ottoman Empire and Syria before finally coming once again under Turkish rule in 1939, following France’s separation of the region from Syria. Apart from maps showing Hatay as Syrian territory, the Syrian policy has been to avoid discussing Hatay and offering only evasive answers when asked to specify its future claims and ambitions. This has included a complete media silence on the issue. However, despite attempts before the current Syrian Conflict to resolve the dispute, the outbreak of Syrian violence in 2011 reasserted the Syrian view of “Turkish occupation” and the “Turkification” of Syrian soil.

Turkey’s dam-building projects around its south-eastern towns have also been a source of tension due to the threat to Syrian water security. This, combined with Turkey’s Western leanings and NATO membership, prompted Damascus to adopt a Kurdish policy in the 1990s. This included the harbouring of Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) fighters, and therefore fuelled the discontent between the two nations. Ties between Ankara and Damascus further soured as Turkish–Israeli
relations blossomed during the Palestinian–Israeli peace process of the 1990s. The post-Cold War era for Turkey helped aid the establishment of a military alliance with Israel in 1996, which allowed Ankara to take a much more confrontational stance to al-Assad’s Syria and the PKK. This culminated in the 1998 threat to invade Syria if it rejected the demand to hand over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, whom Turkey claimed it was sheltering.

Alongside the brief opening of arms to the PKK, Syria is answerable to similarly provocative methods towards Turkey. Both Moran Stern and Dennis Ross have asserted that “over the past five decades, Syria has attempted to use its unique strategic location to advance its national interests, often at the expense of Turkey.” One prime example of such Syrian activity can be found in a 1995 report regarding an emerging military pact between Syria and Greece, which would have ultimately forced Turkey to mobilise forces on two fronts simultaneously in the event of an open conflict.

Nevertheless, following the collapse of the Israel–Palestine Peace Process in 2000, and after the Syrian expulsion of Öcalan in 1998, relations between Ankara and Damascus enjoyed a significant upturn for the decade preceding the conflict currently raging across Syria. This short interlude in hostilities could even be considered a collaborative partnership, given the military training agreement formalised in 2002 and a free trade agreement signed in 2007. For Turkey, this rapprochement transformed Syria into a gateway to the south which it had needed for some time, facilitating its politico-economic infiltration of the wider Middle East. However, the popular uprising against Assad from March 2011 ended this dynamic in its entirety.

From 2011, the wave of similar uprisings across Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia, and other serious attempts of revolution across the likes of Bahrain and Algeria, inevitably caused concern within Ankara’s corridors of power about the possibility of a turbulent transition in its southern neighbour. As Schanzer and Tahiroglu correctly assert, it was therefore logical that Turkey sought an influence in the future of Syria, with a particular opportunity to install a Sunni regime.

According to Ahmet Davutoğlu, while the Turkish authorities were keen to highlight the moral case for the rapid decline in their relations with Syria during 2011, by this stage many of the conditions that had pushed the two countries together during the 2000s had diminished in importance. Yet, this departure from a defrosting of relations in the previous decade was still considered a blow. For example, it highlighted that there were clear gaps in Turkish knowledge and intelligence when it came to Syria that exposed the reality behind Turkish President Erdoğan’s past assurances of peaceful coexistence.

Despite a deeper history of suspicion and antagonism between the two nations, this revelation revealed a short-sightedness in the Turkish intelligence community that would quickly be rectified with the onset of conflict across the Syrian border. Sensing a betrayal by al-Assad, notably as a result of his disregard of Turkey’s opening up to his government, Turkey decided to take the initiative and re-invest in its intelligence network across the region, re-igniting former alliances. For instance, the sweeping changes in the region compelled Turkey to engage with Israel for discreet talks during Operation Pillar of Cloud against Hamas in November 2012. This involved a meeting between Tamir Pardo, Director of the Israeli Mossad, and the MIT’s Head, Hakan Fidan, in Cairo. In addition, it became clear that Turkey was empowering Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, a
longstanding enemy of al-Assad, through initiatives such as the Syrian National Council, for which the Brotherhood adopted a leading role, and its hosting of the 2012 Friends of Syria meeting.\textsuperscript{18}

The descent into bloody violence in Syria meant a renewed Turkish focus on Syria itself; an old adversary which appeared to have slipped from the top of the agenda with Turkey’s senior security echelons. However, with a lack of ground-work upon which to operate, the theme of Turkey’s early engagement towards Syria was one of reaction and short-sightedness.

Exploited leaks: setting the media’s tone towards Turkey’s security strategy in Syria

Having celebrated its fiftieth year since establishment in 2015, the MIT could be regarded as one of the most enigmatic intelligence agencies within NATO’s membership. Often less documented and scrutinised than the intelligence agencies of the United States, UK, France and Germany, the MIT has been able to build itself in its own image and constantly adapt to its changing external surroundings. For instance, despite establishing itself from a military background, this character of the organisation has become negligible, according to the former director of Foreign Operations, Yavuz Ataç.\textsuperscript{19}

However, some of this military legacy has been retained by the current Head of MIT, Hakan Fidan, a retired non-commissioned officer in the Turkish Army. Given this heritage, it follows that the MIT enjoys a strong relationship with the Turkish Armed Forces, an implication of which has been the subsequent influence which the intelligence service has exerted Syrian operations, according to some confirmed and suspected media reports. If this is to be believed, this military-intelligence approach has provided the opportunity to dictate to some extent the tempo of the war based on Ankara’s terms, as well as rival the power of its regional rivals, during the early phases of the uprising against Assad.

This could be further assumed from Henri Barkey’s claim that “Ankara saw the swift collapse of the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian governments as caused by a historic tide that would also sweep away the Ba’ath regime of Syria.”\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, President Erdoğan attempted to use Fidan to lead on talks in Damascus to institute domestic reforms to help return stability.\textsuperscript{21}

That Turkey elected to seek its own primary gains in Syria can also be ascertained from two leaked conversations of discussions involving Fidan, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Turkey’s Deputy Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Yaşar Güler. While these two leaked conversations form a part of a longer transcript that has been edited to these current lengths for reasons unknown, there can be little doubt of the context which details clandestine actions discussed by Turkey’s senior security staff.

The first of these leaked phone conversations provides the basis for the allegations around Turkish-sponsored support for an array of armed groups. This leaked conversation was published following suspicions reported by various media claiming that trucks containing weapons and other military-related supplies were crossing the border into Syria unchecked.\textsuperscript{22} Given that this part of the transcript was released by RT some time after the conversation took place, it can be assumed that there was an element of political mischief. Turkey’s mainstream conservative newspaper, Hurriyet, even acknowledged the matter with an article on the Turkish Opposition leader’s claim

\begin{footnotesize}
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\textsuperscript{18} Schanzer and Tahirolgu, \textit{Bordering on Terrorism}, 9.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Narwani, “Rinse and repeat.”
\end{footnotesize}
that the content of the transcript was no “state secret.” Indeed, upon its publication there was notable interest from other international media outlets from the New York Times to Reuters. This led to increased speculation that the MIT was behind the operation, given their historic links to the military and border security units.

In the conversation, alleged to have taken place in early 2014, Fidan is recognised as stating to Davutoğlu and Güler that the “[MIT] have sent there about 2 thousand trucks’ load of weapons.” Güler responds that weapons are plentiful and the greater need is ammunition. While the conversation does not explicitly mention the armed groups that the Turkish Government is suspected to have supported at the time, the reference to 2,000 trucks containing weapons in a country of conflict in which Turkey had no official military presence on the ground rightly raises serious questions from international media groups. These claims have also been discussed by Barkey who refers to the Turkish state’s blind eye to the movement of fighters and arms across the border, along with claims that groups such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation were enlisted to assist.

These widespread reports, primarily from Russian and Western media supporting the notion of Turkish sponsorship of extremist groups in Syria, show how a source is exploited in favour of a wider international agenda in order to disrupt Turkey’s core strategy in Syria. In addition, and for example, journalist Can Dündar wrote in detail about instances of suspicious trucks crossing the border into Syria; reports for which he claimed he was subsequently jailed. Similarly, Dündar’s reports date from early 2014, in which he asserts that.

Early in 2014, a truck understood to belong to the Turkish intelligence service was stopped near the Syrian border. The gendarmerie and the intelligence officials in control of the convoy pulled guns on each other. This was the moment the two blocks vying to rule the state came face to face. The truck was searched. Beneath the camouflage composed of medicines boxes, weapons and ammunition were found. The truck was held for a while, but following the intervention of government officials a safe passage into Syria was granted.

It was declared that the trucks contained humanitarian aid. This incident, which fuelled allegations that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government was intervening in the Syrian civil war, was rapidly covered up.

The detail of this account adds to the speculation and provides strong indications to the domestic and international public that the MIT was complicit in the operation. In any case, regardless of Turkey and the MIT’s true tactical blueprint, the direction of the international press no doubt built pressure upon a Turkish Government already under the spotlight for similar actions.

Additional sources have also reported that Turkey’s intelligence community acted in cooperation with Syria’s extremist groups, even in alliance with some of its regional rivals. For instance, Reuters reported in July 2012 that Turkey had set up a secret base with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to direct military and communication equipment to Syria’s rebels from a city near the border. “Turkey is the main coordinator/facilitator” one source said. Moreover, in a visit to the United

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25 Ibid.
26 Barkey, “Turkey’s Syria Predicament,” 118.
28 Schanzer and Tahiroglu, Bordering on Terrorism, 14.
States in September 2013, the Iraqi National Security Adviser, Faleh al-Fayyad, explicitly warned that some of Syria’s armed groups and financiers from Qatar and other Arab nationals were meeting in Turkish hotels and facilitating money transfers. With this array of sources all stating to claim covert collusion, it is understandable how the international community might have seen Turkish activity as not wholly trustworthy.

These widely reported stories have led to criticism of the Turkish state within the Turkish Parliament. In October 2014, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the country’s main opposition party, The People’s Republican Party, cited documents from a prosecutor in the southern city of Adana (home to Incirlik Air Base and NATO patriot missile batteries) in which two Turkish truck drivers had given testimonies in support of the allegations. While this will have been an attempt to embarrass the Turkish Government, it undoubtedly shows the abundance and importance of accounts which are monitored by Turkey’s coalition partners and rivals.

Given the interest of Turkey’s major regional rivals, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey’s alleged actions suggest a reactive approach towards influencing Syria’s future, in order to secure its own, rather than the collective mission of its allies. In the early years of the Syrian conflict, it was becoming observable that al-Assad’s government was falling under the military gains being made by the host of opposition groups, both extremist and western-backed. For Turkey, any one of these groups could stake a claim for power, even a group with extreme and opposite policies to Ankara. Therefore, to many looking in, the fundamental underpinning of Ankara’s approach suggested that, while keeping its friends close, it wanted its enemies closer still.

For instance, through allegations of Turkey secretly funding Sunni militias it could counter Iran’s push for influence through the sponsorship of Hezbollah’s activity in the western Syria. Turkey’s cooperation in this area with some of the Gulf States also suggests an approach towards countering Iran, while also being able to keep a close and watchful eye on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. By coming to this assumption as a result of such heavy media reporting, the tactics within the strategies of many interested parties would be subject to change.

Some of the above media and eyewitness claims are backed up by Christopher Philips’ assertion that “turning armed militias was based on the perception, first, that diplomatic initiatives were failing and, second, that other regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were (albeit indirectly) providing arms anyway.” In doing so, this strategy also seeks to control who gets weapons, with the hope of restricting the emergence of radical Jihadist groups in Syria.

The second of the leaked conversations, which took place in 2014, discussed plans for a possible operation within Syria to secure the Tomb of Suleyman Shah, grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire. In the first instance, such a conversation supports the idea of Turkish fear of the uprising within Syria threatening its territorial and cultural integrity. The tomb of the Shah lies 35 kilometres within Syria, but given its high importance to Turkish history and culture, as well as a 1921 Franco-Russian agreement, it is considered to be its sovereign Turkish space. It was believed that the Islamic State were threatening the tomb’s destruction as they advanced closer to it.
The successful operation to return the Shah’s remains took place in February 2015, shortly following the Kurdish liberation of Kobane, which allowed the Turkish Forces to advance through the area to the tomb. Moreover, by this time, Davutoğlu, who was party to the leaked 2014 conversations, was now the Turkish Prime Minister. This allowed him greater power to execute the plans we helped devise in the dialogue.

Media analysis of the leaked phone conversation reveals the links between the MIT and military. Fidan and his interlocutors discussed the ways and means for the Tomb of Suleyman Shah operation to be launched, with the MIT Head quite noticeably at the centre of the discussion. The leaked call details Erdoğan’s thoughts that an attack on Syria “must be seen as an opportunity for us [Turkey].” In response to this sentiment, Fidan offers that he could send four men from Syria to attack Turkey to “make up a cause of war.” This suggests that Turkish thinking was very much about taking advantage of the security situation to its south, affording the opportunity to reclaim the Tomb.

Such action by the Turkish military, supported by Fidan and the MIT, as published by the international press, portrays to the wider world a Turkey becoming more emboldened as their influence in the conflict and towards its protagonists grew before it. Turkish behaviour immediately following the allegations brought about by the leaked conversations is similarly telling. For example, following the case of the leaks, Barkey states that Erdoğan’s control of all the levers of state power allowed his government to easily impose news blackouts and gag orders should the narrative shift against him.

Despite being a part of NATO, Turkey could in fact be viewed as acting on its own initiative, perhaps because NATO was seen to be dragging its feet over Turkish requests in early 2013 for assistance at its border with Syria. Given the West’s reluctance in 2013 to form an international military effort against Syria’s extremist groups, Turkey became by 2014 one of the leading external players in the conflict. Yet it was through the media’s reporting and exploitation of sources that still indicated the active support for militant groups it regarded as proxies on the ground and its calculated engagement with Tehran, Doha and Riyadh. In addition, this portrayal of Turkey’s independent and slightly maverick mentality led to some branding Ankara an unreliable ally in the fight against terrorism.

The pressure builds: the media sets the agenda

By late 2015, Turkey had allowed the United States to use its facilities to conduct strikes against militant groups it previously supported. These militant groups were by this time conducting attacks of their own in Turkish cities, and Turkey had exponentially opened up its intelligence sharing network to regional and international allies.

The media were beginning to report that the relationship between Turkey and their militant extremist connections was backfiring, following the June 2014 kidnapping of 49 Turkish citizens by Islamic State, in Mosul, which, at the time, was one of the most serious attacks in modern Turkish history. The hostages were finally freed on 20 September 2014. Again, the MIT was suggested to have been involved after the media maintained that Turkey “obtained the release of...
the hostages in a covert operation,” but did not specify how this operation was achieved. While on this occasion, it was then eventually reported that Turkey directly negotiated a swap of 180 jihadists for the hostages, it was becoming clear that areas of the international press were compelled to attribute such action at the feet of the MIT in the first instance.

On 12 October 2015, Turkish authorities identified Islamic State as the perpetrators behind a huge double suicide bombing in Ankara that killed 97 Turks, not active in the conflict. This was one of the several similar incidents that had occurred during recent months that was portrayed as a clear change in direction of the conflict in which Turkey was involved. Another such attack was a suicide bombing in Suruç that killed 33 people on 20 July 2015, and initially led Turkey to taking on a military approach against extremist groups to its south. However, this also reignited its conflict with the PKK following accusations of their involvement.

The scaling back of the MIT’s connections with the extremist groups in Syria was complemented a growing opposition from the Turkish public to Ankara’s interventions. It is clear that the idea of greater Turkish activism in Syria became broadly unpopular amongst the electorate and international community. In fact, Turkey’s involvement in Syria was at the centre of a heated political warfare during Turkey’s municipal elections on 30 March 2014. A Pew Research poll found that 65% of Turks opposed their Government sending arms and military supplies to anti-government groups in Syria. In turn, this led to greater local scrutiny, such as one intervention of a local judge to search a truck on its way to Syria apparently under the guidance of Turkey’s MIT. This goes some way towards showing the degree of raised discontent in Turkey, as a result of the growing international and domestic media reports implicating Turkish security forces in the instances outlined above.

Media and political speculation further increased in 2015, when Fidan made the surprising decision to step down as the Head of the MIT and to run for membership of the Turkish Parliament. At the time, speculation circulated around political and media circles, with some suggesting it was his high-level role within Turkey’s damaged Syria policy that sparked this move. As highlighted by Metin Gurcan, key media commentator Ertugrul Ozkok has openly stated that, “Fidan is escaping from something. He wants to distance himself from a danger and doesn’t want to be held responsible for it.” According to Gurcan and Ozkok, Fidan fled from the scene of Turkey’s Syrian policy, which was branded as being “no longer shaped by logic but by emotions.”

Considering the growing number of allegations focused on Turkey’s actions in the first years of the Syria conflict, combined with augmented attacks by militant extremists inside Turkey’s border and to its people abroad, it is not inconceivable to believe that Fidan left MIT because he was beginning to feel the negative ramifications of a policy which could get him into trouble with either international law or his President. This episode, made embarrassing by the widespread media coverage on the matter, offers the view that Turkey’s strategy was fracturing, not only in its external relations with groups on the ground but also within its senior internal security policy mechanisms. The fiasco wore on longer when just one month later, on 9 March 2015, Fidan withdrew his candidacy for election, suggesting Erdoğan flexed his power in order to reinvent Turkey’s Syrian policy. Again, this shows how the media has been able to direct international and domestic dis-
Discussions towards Turkey's security and intelligence agencies, more so than is found in other nations involved in Syria.

Fidan’s potential fear and suspicions could be assumed to be well grounded following revelations that the recording of the conversations between Davutoğlu, the head of MIT Head, and Güler was originally exposed by the United States’ National Security Agency (NSA). According to a German magazine The Focus, the NSA was instructed by unnamed U.S. political leadership to gather information about the “intentions” of the Turkish leadership and monitor Turkey’s operations in 18 other key areas. This evidences how both the international and domestic Turkish press have simultaneously set an agenda to portray Turkey’s Syrian strategy as a clandestine intelligence operation that has eventually stumbled. The charges became a focal point for domestic polemic, particularly as the pro-Erdoğan press levelled charges of treason and other crimes at the president’s enemies, who included prosecutors, police officers and rival press organisations.

The negative press around Turkey’s role in Syria was soon followed by the lifting of the ban on America’s use of combat aircraft at Incirlik Air Base in September 2015. Previously, the United States was limited to only using Incirlik for surveillance and reconnaissance purposes. This was later followed by the arrival of Saudi Air Force jets in February 2016. That these moves came in the aftermath of varied allegations from the international and domestic press suggests that Turkey came under intense strain from those national parties involved with Syria to show further commitment to the mission against militant extremism.

This pressure was evident towards the end of 2015. For instance, on 15 December 2015, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter urged Turkey to do more to help destroy the Islamic State. He added that Turkey’s most significant contribution would be to seal its border with Syria, following the widespread reports about Ankara allegedly allowing certain stretches to be used for illicit trade and shuttling foreign fighters back and forth. By the turn of 2015, Turkey was then reported to be closely working with international partners in the fight against IS and its affiliates, following the attempted New Year’s Eve attacks in Germany. German authorities were tipped off by Turkey about an impending New Year’s Eve attack on metro stations in Munich planned by IS, reportedly part of a wider plan for simultaneous attacks across Europe. Turkey had reportedly already shared information with France, Austria, Italy and Belgium about a group of five IS terrorists who crossed over into Europe to carry out the attacks. According to the various media reports in Turkey, the MIT found out that the group of would-be attackers had crossed over via the Aegean and Mediterranean in October, using fake passports.

At the same time, a known senior IS operative, Aine Leslie Junior Davis, was caught in a joint intelligence-sharing effort by the MIT, MI6 and the CIA after being pursued though Syria and Turkey before his capture.

These more recent assessments of Turkey’s intelligence and security strategy towards Syria and extremist groups offer a very different picture to that painted by the media in the period spanning 2011 to early 2014.

49 “German magazine,” Al Arabiya.
51 “Turkey tipped off,” Russia Today.
53 “Turkey tipped off,” Russia Today.
Conclusion

International and opposition media, as well as Turkish subversive actors, have played a considerable role in shaping perceptions of Turkey’s involvement in Syria, with a particular focus on the role allegedly played by the MIT. This has created international pressure to make further commitments to the international fight against extremists in Syria and resulted in closer intelligence sharing, as reflected on 31 December 2016, and stronger security partnerships with the United States. This pressure mounted both domestically and internationally following particular press reports claiming to evidence the MIT’s covert support for militant groups, such as the leaked conversations between senior intelligence, military and political figures openly stating their support for militant groups south of the border.

Turkey’s covert collusion with militant and extremist groups was not only alleged in Turkish and western media but also from some former foreign fighters who benefited from it. For example, one former IS fighter interviewed on Newsweek admitted that he “travelled in a convoy of trucks as part of an [IS] unit from their stronghold in Raqqa, across the Turkish border, through Turkey and then back across the border to attack Syria Kurds in the city of Serekaniye,” in the February of 2014. This was also confirmed by Islamic State commanders, one of which stated that “there was full cooperation with the Turks,” and that he regularly communicated on the radio in Turkish. While such comments by militant fighters in Syria should be treated with caution given IS’s position on non-Sharia communities, the fact that these are collaborated by several eyewitness reports about supplies crossing the border offers the statements some weight across international press coverage.

Aside from the apparent source of military supplies, the international community has long been focussed on cutting the revenue-making options for groups such as IS, such as oil smuggling. In September 2014, Turkish security and intelligence forces orchestrated a crackdown on the flourishing diesel-smuggling trade, digging up private pipelines that ran from Syria to Turkey, and making numerous arrests. Against international pressure, this story shows an attempt by Turkey to prove their commitment to its allies whom may have been sceptical given previous reports.

At the same time, however, suspicions were still being aroused that Turkey was not doing all it could, which poses a problem to the country in its wish to appear a reliable coalition partner. Turkish journalist Fehim Taştekin estimated that the crackdown has decreased smuggling significantly, but thinks the activity continued and authorities should be more aggressive in their approach. These suspicions continued for some time until December 2015 when Russia, now fully involved in the fight against militant groups in partnership with the Syrian government, published evidence of what it believed to be further Turkish collusion with the oil smugglers that help finance IS. Russian intelligence reported nearly 12,000 potential oil-smuggling trucks near the Turkey–Iraq border and said the vehicles’ final destination was Turkey. Footage was also sent out by the Kremlin, and published by RT, that purported to show a flow of trucks crossing the Turkey–Syria border with no restrictions at the Reyhanli checkpoint. Russia maintains that Turkey is the main consumer of the oil abstracted by the IS, which is likely a political reaction to the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish Air force in November 2015. However, given

55 Ibid.
the prior leaked admission of involvement in cross-border smuggling, it would be expected that the MIT would be aware of such activity, thus fuelling international speculation if its involvement. Due to inevitable pressures from the international community and the rise in domestic attacks conducted by extremist groups operating in and linked to Syria, Turkey has been forced to advertise its individual efforts on the ground in counteracting the allegations made around complicity with certain militant groups. However, it remains clear that Turkey’s overall ambition is to have influence over Syria’s future, with a belief that al-Assad must and will fall, leaving a power vacuum potentially similar to post-uprising Egypt or Libya. If Turkey is to secure a non-aggressive, stable neighbour to its south, it would still make every effort to maintain an individual influence outside of that sought by NATO and the international coalition. Therefore, it would be acceptable to assume that the MIT would actively engage with and understand the various actors that seek to take power in Syria.

Turkey now has a more robust strategy towards Syria, which it desperately lacked prior to 2015 and paid the price for at the expense of Turkish lives at the hands of suicide bombings and diplomatic breakdowns after the leaked conversations. Turkey needs the United States and its international allies to help wind down the conflict, while also giving it legitimacy in the political resolution that follows.

Despite the contradiction to Turkey’s historical policies against militant aggressors, the conflicting claims made by numerous media outlets has tended to inform much of international debate. This has involved the opening of Turkish facilities to coalition allies following a string of allegations against Turkish security and intelligence services, which was inevitably not well received internationally.

However, it remains feasible that Turkey could allow activity such as the illicit trade of oil and weapons across its border in order to inherit significant leverage vis-à-vis the likes of Saudi Arabia in the changing face of a key region in the Middle East. Therefore, to better inform and analyse this debate, further examination building upon this analysis is essential, given the lack of substantial academic work on the role of Turkey’s intelligence and security strategy in what is now a major conflict.

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Conflict of Interests

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