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Turkey: Jihadist Highway Revisited

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Shortly before the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Washington, Turkey captured one of the wives of Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the slain leader of ISIS, in addition to several other family members. A week earlier, Turkish police detained 43 suspected ISIS terrorists allegedly preparing for a major attack on Turkish soil. This is all good news, but it's hardly the only news.

With the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) in large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, Turkey became known as a "jihadist highway" that transported Islamist fighters from across the globe to the Levant. A June 2014 [report](#) in Turkish daily *Milliyet* said there were also 3,000 Turkish fighters in ISIS's ranks. Five years later, Ankara is having a hard time convincing the world that it has broken off with the men with the bombs and Kalashnikovs.

Never mind that President Donald Trump is "a big fan" of Turkey's Islamist autocrat, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom Trump [said](#) is "a friend of his" and "a hell of a leader." The generous compliments after a November 13 White House meeting for a man viewed by the democratic world as a neo-Ottoman-sultan reflected the [mindset](#) of vintage Trump. "Anybody wants to come in. Dictators? It's OK. Come on in. Whatever's good for the United States," Trump said just a day before Erdoğan's state visit to Washington.

Shortly before his visit, Erdoğan wanted to be sure he looked good to his host and to the parts of the world that fight terrorism. On November 6, Turkey [captured](#) in northern Syria one of the wives of Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the slain leader of IS, in addition to several other family members. A week before that, on October 29, Turkish police [detained](#) 43 suspected ISIS terrorists allegedly preparing for a major attack on Turkish soil. This is all good, but it's not the whole picture.

In September, a US Treasury blacklist [showed](#) that Turkey has become a haven for terror financing schemes. According to the *Washington Examiner*, the survivors of a 2015 terrorist attack in the West Bank filed a lawsuit against a bank with ties to the Turkish government, accusing the lender of supporting the terrorist group Hamas. Court documents accuse the Turkey-based Kuveyt Bank of aiding and abetting Hamas by “knowingly providing it substantial assistance via financial services” channeled through both the US and international financial systems between 2012 and 2015. Kuveyt’s primary [shareholder](#) is the General Directorate of Associations, an arm of the Turkish government.

Jonathan Schanzer, a former US Treasury official and current senior VP for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), told the *Washington Examiner*:

Sponsorship of Hamas, allowing for jihadists to cross the border to fight in Syria on the side of dangerous Islamist groups, including al Qaeda and ISIS (IS), facilitating sanctions evasion on behalf of the Iranian regime, support for the Muslim Brotherhood. These are foreign policy decisions that the Turkish government has made under Erdoğan.

The lawsuit against [Kuveyt] Bank, which counts the Turkish government as a shareholder, comes two weeks after the US Treasury sanctioned eleven Turkey-linked entities and individuals for supporting Hamas and other jihadist outfits.... Between 2012 and 2015, Tehran [too] relied on Turkish banks and a gold trader with dual Iranian-Turkish citizenship to circumvent US sanctions at the height of Washington’s efforts to thwart the Islamic Republic’s nuclear ambitions. It was the biggest sanctions-evasions scheme in recent history.

Schanzer and Aykan Erdemir, a former Turkish opposition MP and senior fellow at FDD, [wrote](#):

Turkey has also proved a forgiving host to terrorists... Islamic State terrorists continued to operate from Turkish territory well into 2018.Saleh Arouri, the Hamas military commander responsible for the 2014 kidnapping and killing of three teens in the West Bank, spearheaded that operation from Turkish soil. ...Arouri is just one of many Hamas operatives who have operated in Turkey. In 2011, ten Hamas operatives released by Israel as part of a prisoner exchange arrived in Turkey, and many remain active there.

The annual US State Department country report on terrorism released on Nov. 4 shows that Turkey remains a transit point for foreign fighters looking to join

ISIS. The report [said](#): “Turkey is a source and transit country for FTFs (foreign terrorist fighters) seeking to join ISIS (IS) and other terrorist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq.” In October the State Department [confirmed](#) that more than 100 IS prisoners have escaped since Turkey’s October 9 invasion of northern Syria.

On November 14 Nasha't al-Deyhi, host at Egypt’s *Ten.tv* news program, reported on an incriminating leaked tape: “Today's leak confirms without a doubt that Erdoğan, his state, his government, and his party are transferring weapons from Turkey to – this is a shock, to where you may ask – to Nigeria; and to whom? – to the Boko Haram (terrorist) organization.”

All this reporting is about the governance of an Islamist strongman of whom President Trump proudly says he is a big fan. With friends like Erdoğan, Trump’s America will not need enemies.

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