

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

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**Ryan Gingeras. "Istanbul Confidential: Heroin, Espionage, and Politics in Cold War Turkey, 1945-1960."** *Diplomatic History* 37:4 (September 2013): 779–806. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht057. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht057>

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Reviewed by **Matthew Pembleton**, American University

**R**yan Gingeras's recent *Diplomatic History* essay makes an important contribution to the study of U.S.-Turkish relations and American counternarcotic operations in the Middle East. Among the article's virtues is a genuinely transnational approach and incorporation of many Turkish secondary sources. Having previously addressed the Iranian-Afghan opium trade and the role of heroin in the Turkish 'deep state,' Gingeras continues to explore how the hidden aspects of foreign relations, like organized crime and covert operations, shape political outcomes and state development; in that regard, "Istanbul Confidential" is successful on many levels, though the poorly documented nature of both drug trafficking and the enigmatic intelligence and security organizations often referred to as the 'deep state' leaves much room for interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Gingeras, "In the Hunt for the 'Sultans of Smack:' Dope, Gangsters and the Construction of the Turkish Deep State," *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 426–441; Gingeras, "Poppy Politics: American Agents, Iranian Addicts and Afghan Opium, 1945-80," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 3 (May 2012): 315–331.

The phrase 'deep politics' is often credited to Peter Dale Scott, see: Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall, *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For related works, see also: John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, The Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation-Building in the American Century* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

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At the core of Gingeras's account is the association between the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) and the Turkish Directorate of Public Safety (DPS). In Gingeras's view, both agencies had ulterior motives when it came to actual drug enforcement and each used the other "to conduct off-the-books intelligence operations" (782). With drug traffickers potential players in the murky world of international espionage, Gingeras concludes that both agencies "constrained their efforts for the sake of larger national security prerogatives" (782). In other words, he implies that the FBN pulled back on potentially disruptive investigations while also providing cover for other clandestine operations.

Gingeras is building on arguments first introduced by Alfred McCoy in *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, which made the case that the CIA employed drug traffickers in several areas of geopolitical conflict. As chronicled in later works like Daniele Ganser's *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe*, Gingeras also notes that by the 1970s drug trafficking had become an important source of revenue for "legitimate right-wing movements and the expansion of Turkey's clandestine security apparatus" (782).<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the specific relationship between the U.S. and Turkey, the bigger issue here is the connection between drug control and national security practices. Gingeras is correct in depicting drug control as secondary to geopolitics and provides a good primer on the history of the FBN, which saw itself as integral to American security and whose agents often moved between the worlds of law enforcement and intelligence. It is more or less certain that on occasion foreign drug enforcement has, in Gingeras's words, provided "a veneer of legitimacy" (798) to traditional intelligence operations. The question, however, is whether or not that was the FBN's primary purpose in Turkey.

Gingeras seems to conclude that it was. Although he notes that American concern with Turkish opium dates to the 1920s, Gingeras ties the expansion of FBN foreign operations to the emergence of the Cold War. Drug control was an important component of American-led modernization efforts and foreign nation-building during the Cold War, but it was also a genuine security imperative in its own right.<sup>3</sup>

Close scrutiny of FBN records from Turkey and other foreign countries (particularly in Europe and the Middle East) show definitively that the Bureau's foremost concern was always disrupting the heroin trade. Anticommunist rhetoric was politically useful, and Narcotic Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger was a canny technocrat who knew that a good

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1972, rev. 2003); Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe* (London and New York: Frank Cass, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Weimer, *Seeing Drugs: Modernization, Counterinsurgency, and U.S. Narcotics Control in the Third World, 1969-1976* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2011).

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relationship with the CIA was an asset to foreign investigations and the FBN's own bureaucratic survival. But the FBN's top priorities were always drugs and its own autonomy.

This bureaucratic context is central to understanding the Bureau's actions. Although facilitated by American geopolitical ascendance, the expansion of FBN foreign operations was motivated primarily by competition with U.S. Customs and the belief that only the Bureau's unique brand of undercover investigations, coupled with international regulation, could achieve the American counternarcotic policy of source control. Turkey was particularly important as the origin of the Atlantic heroin trade and drug busts made overseas were critical to both disrupting the heroin supply chain and demonstrating the necessity of an independent Bureau.

A critical figure in this story is Kemal Aygun, a Turkish politician who ran the DPS for most of the 1950s (both officially and at times unofficially). Gingeras provides an excellent account of how Aygun's "ability to straddle politics and policing" (785) made him a pivotal figure during the ten years of the Adnan Menderes regime. Gingeras also includes tantalizing details on several important opium traffickers, all of whom wielded remarkable influence and describes how Aygun, as well as his successors and political rivals, shielded several targets from FBN investigations.

What is unclear from the extant documentary record is why. Gingeras notes the direct involvement of several Turkish Democratic Party figures, including Aygun, in criminal enterprises. Protecting mobbed-up politicians or politically-connected mobsters could be construed as preserving national security, but it is probably more accurate to describe the protection of local traffickers as preserving Turkish political stability or partisan influence in general, not to mention sheltering the lucrative opium trade. When the Turkish government finally acceded to U.S. pressure to prohibit all opium production in 1972, the decision proved so unpopular that it was reversed only two years later.<sup>4</sup>

Gingeras also overlooks the problem of nationalist sentiment, which plagued the Bureau in almost every country in which it operated. The agents recognized that few foreign police agencies welcomed American intrusion into what was considered an exclusively domestic concern. As one agent mused, "If, for example, Scotland Yard had sent men over to District #2 [the FBN designation for New York City], and these men had had successes which outshone the work of the District, I feel that perhaps our own attitude would be unfairly but understandably cool..."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nasuh Uslu, *The Turkish-American Relationship Between 1947 and 2003: The History of a Distinctive Alliance* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2003), 219–251.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Knight to Charles Siragusa, July 16, 1953, in Folder "(0660) France, French Police, Agent Siragusa," Box 156, RG 170 [Records of the Drug Enforcement Administration], National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

Seen in this light, the obstinance of officials like Aygun, who did not relish the presence of American narcotic agents, takes on new color. It also seems Aygun was just as concerned with protecting himself and the American agents, as the traffickers. One Foreign Service Officer present for Agent Charles Siragusa's first meeting with Aygun reported the police chief was "afraid for his own safety" and feared revenge from "high-powered traffickers," while other American observers confirmed that Siragusa was stalked by the Istanbul underworld throughout his initial sojourn in the country.<sup>6</sup> In Aygun's calculus, a dead American agent would have been immeasurably more damaging than a few blown investigations.

The relationship between the FBN and DPS was deeply problematic, but it was not as willfully nefarious as Gingeras's "spy vs. spy" framework suggests. In 1956, for example, Gingeras claims the FBN "invited" Galip Labernas, one of Aygun's henchmen, to train with the American agents in Rome (799). A close reading of FBN records, however, indicates that Labernas actually showed up unannounced and put the FBN in something of a predicament when the Italian government refused to allow him to participate in local investigations. "Frankly, I am surprised at this development," Siragusa wrote upon the Turkish detective's arrival, "but I cannot refuse to accept Captain Labernas for one year's training since we have been working on and off, but almost continuously, in Turkey for the past five years."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, both Siragusa and Gingeras overstate the extent of the Bureau's access to Turkey in the 1950s. Aygun was very successful in keeping the FBN at arm's length, partly by requiring the agents to work with minders like Labernas and his partner Ali Eren who, Gingeras notes, steered the FBN toward low-ranking traffickers. Even during relatively active periods, the FBN often had to rely on long-range investigations conducted second-hand by informants sent from the Beirut office. One 1956 note indicated that the agents would no longer attempt "to remain in Turkey for indefinite periods," but worried about falling "out of touch with the situation there." A briefing paper prepared three years later

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Lewis, Foreign Service Report, July 27, 1950, in Folder "(1963-3) State Department 'Secret,'" Entry 10 [Classified Subject Files], RG 170, NARA. Also see a note by Frederick Merrill dated September 6, 1950, and a memo dated October 3, 1950 by B.E. Kuniholm, in Classified General Records, Ankara Embassy, 1950-1952, Box 58 (Decimal 370.31), RG 84 [Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State], NARA.

<sup>7</sup> Siragusa is quoted from a report to Anslinger, dated, December 5, 1956, in Folder "(0660) Turkey, 1955-1956," Box 163. Problems with Labernas's diplomatic status are reported in a letter dated March 6, 1957 from Siragusa to DPS official R. Azmi Yumak, in Folder "(0660) Turkey #9, 1957-1959," Box 164, RG 170, NARA.

confirmed that agents had “not spent extended periods of time in Turkey.”<sup>8</sup> Even once the FBN established an official outpost in July 1960 and began making record seizures, operations remained troubled by bureaucratic squabbling when a recently promoted Labernas tried to consolidate Turkish drug enforcement under his own office and limit American involvement. FBN supervisors consistently preached patience to field agents; “Last week you only had one slice of bread,” one counseled, “now you have 3/4 of a whole loaf, let’s not be over-anxious to get the whole loaf.”<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the FBN realized the presence of American narcotic agents on foreign soil was a delicate situation and was prepared to accept a certain level of compromise in order to maintain its foothold overseas. There is very little documentary evidence of the FBN pulling back on drug investigations that threatened to upset CIA operations (which does not mean it never happened), but there is ample evidence that FBN foreign enforcement was constrained (at the personal, cultural, legal, and administrative levels) by the natural impediments to international police work. After encountering signs of police complicity in the drug trade in Lebanon and Turkey, for example, Agent Siragusa concluded that such setbacks were “relatively unimportant when compared to our accomplishments in those countries and our desire to continue working in those areas.”<sup>10</sup>

Many of Gingeras’s larger conclusions are sound. Foreign drug enforcement was fundamentally about exerting American hegemony and nearly always served as a vehicle to ‘Americanize’ foreign police forces. There were also noteworthy relationships between the FBN and the military and intelligence services associated with the national security state, but they were not quite as determinative as depicted by Gingeras and the ‘deep state’ school. Gingeras states that he is more interested in the mechanics of the FBN-DPS relationship than he is in the “success or failure of Turkish antinarcotics operations,” (782) but his argument that FBN investigations were merely a front or were limited by national security concerns has very real implications for the efficacy of the Bureau’s strategy of stopping drugs at the source, the failure of which becomes much easier to explain if we assume that drug control was not actually the FBN’s true purpose.

**Matthew Pembleton** is a Ph.D. Candidate at American University. His dissertation, titled “Toiling in the Vineyards: American Security and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, 1930-1968,” examines the roots of the American drug war and the relationship between

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<sup>8</sup> Note affixed to an August 14, 1956 letter from Siragusa to Yumak, in Folder “(0660) Turkey, 1955-1956,” Box 163; unsigned briefing memo dated March 24, 1959 in Folder “(0660) Turkey #9, 1957-1959,” Box 164, RG 170, NARA.

<sup>9</sup> Addendum by supervisor Jack Cusack included in a December 13, 1962 memo report by Agent Joseph Arpaio, in Folder “(0660) Turkey #11, 1962-1963,” Box 164, RG 170, NARA.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Siragusa to B.T. Mitchell, dated June 7, 1955, in Folder “(0660) Turkey, 1955-1956,” Box 163, RG 170, NARA.

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drug control and national security. He currently has a related article, titled “Containing Addiction: The Federal Bureau of Narcotics in Postwar Istanbul, Interventionism and the Genesis of the Drug War,” under review.

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