

Ten years ago, a horrific car accident grimly illuminated how Turkish state officials colluded with drug barons to traffic drugs into Europe and Britain. **Adrian Gattton** investigates how corruption has smoothed the path of heroin from Afghanistan into the UK.

**O**NE fateful evening, on November 3, 1996, a black Mercedes 600 pulled away from a plush Izmir hotel, and travelled towards Istanbul. Turkey's roads are notoriously dangerous, and on the dark highway, near the town of Susurluk, the Mercedes smashed into an oncoming truck. Three of its four passengers died in the pile-up.

Photographs show blood-stained seats in a mangled wreck, the bonnet wrinkled-up and scorched by fire. Medics pulled out the bodies of an MP, a police chief, a beauty queen and her lover, a top Turkish gangster and hitman called Abdullah Catli. In the boot they found an assassin's tools: pistols with silencers and machine guns, plus false diplomatic passports.

When the accident hit the papers, it emerged that Catli, a heroin trafficker on Interpol's wanted list, was carrying a diplomatic passport signed by none other than the Turkish Interior Minister himself.

#### DEEP STATE

The Susurluk Incident became Turkey's Watergate, exposing the deep links between the Turkish state, terrorists and drug traffickers. It revealed what Turks call the Gizli Devlet, or Deep State – the politicians, military officers and intelligence officials who worked with drug bosses to move drugs from Afghanistan into Europe.

"It was like a flash of lightning," says Hugh Pope, a British writer on Turkish affairs who has lived in Istanbul since the 1980s. "For a brief moment, it lit up everything that was really happening behind the stage."

We should remember Susurluk today, because it is an event which can help us to understand Britain's current heroin addiction. Susurluk showed that many drug traffickers who helped create Britain's heroin addiction boom were backed by the Turkish establishment.

For example, Abdullah Catli, who died in the accident, trafficked heroin to the UK with the aid of the Turkish embassy in London which issued him a passport under his alias Mehmet Ozbay. He also had a UK work permit. Huseyin Baybasin, another Turkish heroin kingpin now in jail in Holland, who after Susurluk went public with revelations about state corruption, later explained his role in his book *Trial by Fire*: "I handled the drugs which came through the channel of the Turkish Consulate in England." But as he

adds: "I was with the Mafia but I was carrying this out with the same Mafia group in which the rulers of Turkey were part."

The British authorities are well aware of Turkey's role in the drugs trade. In a story I broke in *The Guardian* earlier this year, I explained how in the 1990s Baybasin told British Customs and Excise investigators about state collusion in the drugs trade. After initial meetings in London, according to a source, these two drug liaison officers – whose names are known to Druglink – later travelled regularly to Holland to meet Baybasin.

According to a witness statement given to an immigration case involving Baybasin's family, Huseyin agreed to provide investigators with information about what he knew of the role of Turkish politicians and officials in the heroin trade. The contents of the discussions are not known in detail, but in a string of newspaper and TV interviews, he claimed he was assisted by Turkish officers working for NATO in Belgium. "The government kept all doors open for us," he said. "We could do as we pleased."

#### POLITICS

What has Britain done about it? Not enough, it would seem, given the scale of the heroin still hitting the UK's shores. Turkey is a NATO-member and a moderate Islamic country with a secular state. Discussions with such a vital ally about its heroin problem have been tricky. When, for example, in 1997, Tom Sackville, the then UK Home Office minister, accused the Turkish government of being neck-deep in the drugs trade, he got a stiff demarche from the Turkish embassy (Sackville was speaking off-the-cuff and not following government policy). Our Foreign Office, rather than backing the minister, vented its fury on his department for meddling in foreign affairs, according to a source familiar with the row.

Sackville's foray aside, the British government's reluctance to publicly condemn Turkey has frustrated investigators. We got a rare public glimpse of this when, in 2001, Chris Harrison, a senior Customs officer in Manchester, told veteran crime reporter Martin Short in his TV series *Godfathers*, that Customs could not get at the Turkish kingpins because they are "protected" at a high level.

Turkey's heroin trade remains a sensitive diplomatic issue and so the ultra-secretive new Serious and Organised Crime

# The Susurluk

Agency (SOCA), which has incorporated Customs' investigators, is unlikely to be so frank in future (the press policy they have adopted is more akin to MI5's). However, SOCA officers I have spoken with off-the-record are still sceptical about Turkey. One told me how he was even spied upon while working on a big drugs operation in Istanbul.

Meanwhile, Turkey remains central to the UK's heroin problem. "Since the 1970s, Turkey has accounted for between 75 and 90 per cent of all heroin in the UK," said Mark Galeotti, a former intelligence officer and expert on the Turkish mafia. The key traffickers are Turks, or criminals who operate along that route using Turkish contacts ("the Turkish connection").

**CLEAN-UP**

Without doubt, there have been efforts to clean-up. International pressure after Susurluk brought some reforms, especially in money laundering regulations. And the Foreign Office funds, via the UNODC, the Turkish International Academy against Drugs and Organised Crime.

And since the late 1990s, the police and Customs, sometimes with Turkish assistance, have busted one trafficker after another from the "Turkish connection". Here is a short roll-call: the Arif family of the Old Kent Road in London is largely eliminated, Liverpoolian kingpin Curtis Warren is in jail in Holland, Jimmy 'the Hitman' Karagozlu was jailed, Ahmed and Amir Haghghat-Khou are in jail, the Kubilay family are out of action, and Ali Tore recently got 26 years. Other kingpins once mysteriously based here, such as Nurettin Guven and Alathin Cakici, have gone.

But as soon as one Turkish drug baron is jailed, another seems to take his place. Is Turkey just a victim of geography, as some experts claim, stuck between Afghanistan and Europe, or are the problems highlighted by Susurluk still cause for concern?

"There won't be another Susurluk," says Hugh Pope, who argues that Susurluk forced Turkey into a "virtuous cycle" of reform and soul-searching.

Others, like Turkey's former spy chief, Mehmet Eymur, would disagree. He moved to Washington and, by 2000, from that safe haven dished the dirt on the officials and politicians who escaped punishment for Susurluk. "Unfortunately," Eymur said at that time, "in Turkey, one scandal ends only to be followed by another."

His criticisms are echoed by Professor Frank Bovenkerk, of Utrecht University, whose book on the Turkish mafia is forthcoming in the UK. He told Druglink: "In Turkey now, [scandals like Susurluk] are so well-known, they don't even bother to cover it up any more."

If those remarks seem intemperate, they are nothing compared to those of a former FBI whistle-blower. According

to Sibel Edmonds, who was a translator at the FBI, the Deep State continues to exist in Turkey. Her claims are the most sensational since Susurluk.

**LEGACY**

Edmonds, who speaks Turkish, Farsi and Azeri, was hired by the FBI after 9/11 to translate phone-taps. She was in the front-line of the War on Terror, a war where terrorism, organised crime and drug-trafficking closely intersect. Headphones on, from her desk she had, as it were, her ear pressed to the wall of a lot of clandestine activity involving Turkey. When asked by Druglink whether the Deep State still operates in Turkey, she said: "Of course it does. It's more powerful than ever."

Edmonds, who gave evidence to the 9/11 commission based on her experience, was fired by the FBI after she accused colleagues of corruption involving Turkey. She is a celebrated whistle-blower in America. But she is bound by a draconian gag order. She can't say a lot, but anyone interested in Susurluk's legacy should listen carefully to what she does say. She questioned how drug trafficking can stop when it is so vital to the Turkish economy: "The sums of money are huge. If it stopped it would cause an economic crash."

Dr Ertan Bese, of the Turkish National Police Academy, wrote in his 2004 doctoral thesis on Turkish organised crime, that the underworld economy of Turkey is worth \$60bn, amounting to a massive 25 per cent of Turkey's national income. A huge proportion of this figure is derived from heroin trafficking.

Edmonds has testified, in secret, to how she discussed hearing Turkish consular officials in the USA apparently discussing drug deals. She told Druglink: "In Turkey everything is run by the military. These activities cannot take place without the permission of the military and the permission of Turkish intelligence."

Until the gag-order on Sibel Edmonds is somehow lifted, we will be unable to explore her claims. However, they do raise concerns that the legacy of Susurluk is still with us and that combating the heroin trade is not so much a matter of police work as politics. But Turkey's crucial value to the British and US governments at a time of crisis in Iraq and Iran means the political will is not there. Meanwhile, Britain's heroin addiction will continue. For us, at least, that is the legacy of Susurluk.

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