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# Brothers and clients: heroin, Turkey, and the making of the Albanian "Mafia"

Gingeras, Ryan

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Brothers and Clients- Heroin, Turkey and the Making of the Albanian “Mafia”  
Dr. Ryan Gingeras, Naval Postgraduate School

For much of the postwar era, heroin trafficking into Western Europe and North America was an industry dominated by French and Italian trafficking networks. The most powerful of these networks, famously labeled the “French Connection,” held sway over the transatlantic trade from their base of operations in Marseilles for over a quarter of a century. Since the collapse of the French Connection in 1973, a variety of groups have seized control over the transshipment of heroin into Western Europe and North America. Among the most recent and noted actors to play a role in the contemporary narcotics trade are Albanians from the former Yugoslavia. Despite the growing prominence of Albanian organized crime groups, there is a great deal about this element of the Eastern European underworld that remains unknown. Very little empirical research has been conducted into the early origins of the various Albanian organized crime factions.

This brief study presents new research on how Albanians based in the former Yugoslavia became intertwined in the Eastern European heroin trade. Rather than focus upon the rise of groups based in the Republic of Albania and Italy, it explores why Albanians became “junior partners” in the construction of both smuggling and distribution networks based in Turkey.

In order to understand how alliances were first formed between Albanian and Turkish drug traffickers, this study tackles three historical tropes. First, it examines the long-standing cultural and historical ties between Turkey and the Albanian-speaking world. Second, it briefly surveys the origins and contemporary evolution of what many have called, somewhat erroneously, the Turkish mafia. Lastly, it provides a critical exploration of how Turks and Albanians have played a role in past and recent shifts in the European heroin.

Through this combined analysis, this paper proposes that we begin to think about Albanian involvement in the heroin trade in a more inclusive manner. The historical and contemporary evolution of Turkish-Albanian networks underscores the need for more transregional approaches towards narcotics trafficking in the Balkans and greater understanding of the organization nature of organized crime groups in the region.

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*Methodology*

This brief study presented here is a byproduct of two separate veins of research I have conducted over the last six years. On the one hand, many of the observations found below are a result of my research on the history of Muslim politics and migration in the former Yugoslavia. Through my archival research in Turkey and the Republic of Macedonia, I have become particularly interested in the synergistic relationship between Albanians living in the former Yugoslavia and the Albanian diaspora in Turkey.

My particular interest in the origins and development of Albanian organized crime networks emerges out of my investigation of the history of the Turkish heroin trade. I have made rigorous use of the National Archives in College Park, which houses a vast number of previously unexplored studies, investigations and reports on the development and evolution of the global heroin trade. My insights into the Albanian underworld are further augmented by my use of the Albanian and Turkish language press.

*General Overview*

To understand the relative ease and speed with which groups of Albanians within the former Yugoslavia attained prominence within European heroin drug, one must first understand the historical and interpersonal ties many Albanians living in the southern Balkans share with compatriots and relatives living in Turkey. The migration of Albanian-speakers from the west Balkans to Anatolia is a phenomenon dating back as early as the sixteenth century. Over the course of the twentieth century, war and political oppression have forced larger numbers of Albanians to seek refuge in Turkey, producing a contemporary diaspora that numbers in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>1</sup> Several factors have helped to facilitate Albanian integration into contemporary Turkish society. In addition to the historic presence of Albanian communities throughout Turkey, a significant portion of refugees and migrants arriving from the former Yugoslavia arrived to Anatolia already fluent in Turkish (a phenomenon one can attribute to the legacies

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<sup>1</sup> Nurca Özgür-Baklacioğlu, “Devletlerin Dış Politikaları Açısından Göç Olgusu: Balkanlar’dan Türkiye’ye Arnavut Göçleri (1920-1990).” PhD Dissertation: Istanbul University, 2003.

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of Ottoman rule in the Balkans). This bilingual tendency found among many Albanians found in both the former Yugoslavia and Turkey has historically helped to blur the dividing line between *de facto* “ethnic” Turks and “ethnic” Albanians.<sup>2</sup>

As largely poor and marginalized newcomers, many Albanian migrants fell into a life of crime upon arriving to Turkey. Press accounts from the mid-1950s, for example, detail the emergence of several notorious Albanian *kabadayı* (or neighborhood toughs or gangsters) in the city of Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> Still other Albanians living in Istanbul and elsewhere assisted in the construction of local heroin trafficking syndicates. Albanians found within the ranks of early drug smuggling networks in Turkey tended to be petty dealers or lower ranking members of major smuggling networks based mostly in Istanbul. American intelligence reports suggest that Albanians were often members of heroin syndicates run by Muslim Georgian bosses from Turkey’s Black Sea coast.<sup>4</sup>

Between the late 1940s to the early 1970s, Istanbul’s major heroin trafficking gangs predominately acted as wholesalers to chemists, distributors and transporters based in Beirut and Marseilles. With the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War and the suppression of the so-called “French Connection”, Istanbul’s heroin networks increasingly relied upon smugglers driving overland through the Balkans to bring their illicit wares to market.<sup>5</sup> Previously classified American reports suggest that Yugoslav middlemen, particularly Albanian refugees and immigrants based in Turkey, were essential in first establishing these trade routes.<sup>6</sup>

It was not until the breakup of Yugoslavia and the fall of Communism that outside observers came to recognize Albanian traffickers as a powerful force within the drug trade. An expansive exposé

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<sup>2</sup> Eran Fraenkel, “Urban Muslim Identity in Macedonia: The Interplay between Ottomanism and Multilingual Nationalism,” in Eran Fraenkel and Christina Kramer (editors), *Language Contact, Language Conflict* (New York: Peter Lang Press, 1993), 27-41.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Arnavut Cafer’ Yedi Kurşunla Öldürüldü,” *Milyet* 6 March 1961.

<sup>4</sup> See Ryan Gingeras, “Beyond Istanbul’s ‘Laz Underworld’: Ottoman Paramilitarism and the Rise of Turkish Organized Crime, 1908-1950,” *Journal of Contemporary European History* 19.3 (2010), 215-230.

<sup>5</sup> Directorate of Intelligence, “The French-Turkish Connection: The Movement of Opium and Morphine Base from Turkey to France (December 1971),” CIA-RDP 73B00296R000300070022-8, CIA Records Search Tool (CREST), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>6</sup> “Report: Submitted to the Secretary General of the Arab League,” 5 November 1953, Middle East File, 1930-1967; Subject Files of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, 1916-1970; Records of the Drug Enforcement Administration; Record Group 170; National Archives Building II, Silver Spring, MD.

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printed in *Der Spiegel* in 1999 documented the degree to which both local Albanian street gangs, as well as major Albanian retailers, came to dominate the narcotics trade in Hamburg. According to Swiss officials, major drug wholesalers based in Turkey rely heavily upon Turkish-born Albanians to distribute drugs in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Turkish authorities, in cooperation with law enforcement agencies based in the southern Balkans, have repeatedly apprehended collaborative smuggling groups of Turkish and former Yugoslav citizens. In 2008, authorities in Istanbul arrested a textile manufacturer from Kosova who operated a heroin trafficking network under the auspices of his otherwise legitimate business dealings in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> The United States has not been immune to the influence of Turkish-Albanian drug networks. In 1985, federal prosecutors brought charges against ten Albanian men who were suspected of operating a large-scale drug distribution network in New York City. According to the investigation, Xhedet Lika, the principle focus of the case, regularly travelled to both Yugoslavia and Turkey in arranging for the transport of heroin into the United States.<sup>9</sup>

This paper does not suppose that there is a singular organization of Turkish or Albanian traffickers at work in the contemporary heroin trade. Rather, as seen throughout the history of drug trafficking out of the Republic of Turkey, small, flexible networks of wholesalers, smugglers and retailers have presided over the bulk of illicit narcotics trading. However, if the Xhevdet Lika case and evidence drawn from Hamburg represents larger patterns of behavior, it is possible that groups in the Republic of Turkey do exercise some centralized control over the activities of both Turkish *and* Albanian groups in Europe and the United States. Greater research on this point is needed.

One issue that press coverage and official reporting has failed to mention or investigate is the degree to which Turkish-Albanian gangs exercise any influence over legitimate state or law enforcement bodies in the Balkans or Turkey. Ancillary cases suggest that such a supposition is not outside the realm of possibilities. Recent accusations of organ smuggling and drug trafficking made against Prime Minister

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<sup>7</sup> Ariane von Barth et. al., “Sprache der Morde,” *Der Spiegel*, 2 August 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Mutlu Özay, “Fidye’nin Altından Uyuşturucu Ticareti Çıktı,” *Zaman* 27 May 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony DeStefano, “Balkan Connection: Brazen as the Mafia, Ethnic Albanian Thugs Specialize in Mayhem,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 1985.

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Hashim Thaçi highlight the potential cooperation between Turkish and Albanian criminal groups in the state of Kosova. According to press reports, illicit organ donors and recipients in Turkey were instrumental in the harvesting operations supposedly conducted under Thaçi’s watch.<sup>10</sup> Organized crime’s influence over elements of the Turkish politic system is well documented.<sup>11</sup> While the so-called “Ergenekon trials” has resulted in a crackdown on prominent organized crime networks in Turkey, some have suggest that the rising power of Tayyip Erdoğan’s AK Party has signal a decline in the political influence of Turkish organized crime at home.<sup>12</sup>

*Policy Recommendations*

Understanding Turkish-Albanian drug networks speaks to the need for more inclusive, trans-regional approaches towards policing and intelligence cooperation among policymakers and law enforcement officials. Efforts undertaken by the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) may provide helpful templates for better cross-border intelligence sharing and cooperation on issues related to Turkish-Albanian networks operating in the Balkans. The SELEC’s particular inclusion of Turkey and members state of the European Union within its cooperative undertakings also underscores the significant role EUROPOL can play in combating this trans-regional threat.

Considering the ongoing influence of Turkish-linked Albanian organized crime groups in New York City and elsewhere, American drug enforcement officials could also take a more active role in facilitating greater cooperation in the Balkans. As of today, no DEA offices are found within either the Republic of Macedonia or Kosova. The opening of offices in Skopje and Prishtina could assist in both the fight against the flow of narcotics into the United States as well as lend a helping hand to EUROPOL’s efforts in within Western Europe and the Balkans.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Lewis, “Doctor at the Heart of Kosovo’s Organ Scandal,” *The Guardian*, 17 December 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Bovenkerk and Yücel Yeşilgöz, *The Turkish Mafia: A History of the Heroin Godfathers* (Lancs: Milo Books, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Gareth Jenkins, “Turkey’s New ‘Deep State’: A Movement Without a Mover,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies* 3.15 (15 September 2010).

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