

# The illicit global weapons traffic has a Turkey-Bulgaria axis point

by Nancy Coker

Years ago, as an exchange student living in Turkey, I visited the town of Ayvalik, a quaint and quiet resort on the Mediterranean coast just south of the Dardanelles and north of Izmir. The time of year was late fall. I remember how utterly placid the place was, how completely idyllic. And I remember too how the excited cries and shouts of us students on holiday shattered the silence that pervaded the area.

The stillness of Ayvalik made that town a perfect heaven, not merely for vacationers, but for gun smugglers as well. For in the 1970s, Ayvalik was to become one of the biggest depots for illegal arms shipments into Turkey, primarily from Bulgaria, but also from Italy, Spain, France, and Czechoslovakia. Everything from handguns and grenades to Leopard battle tanks, Cobra helicopters, and laser-based guidance systems found its way into Ayvalik and dozens of other secluded, out-of-the-way spots along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts, for use by terrorists inside Turkey of both "left" and "right" persuasion, or for transshipment to terrorist units elsewhere in the Middle East.

The torrential flow of weapons into and through Turkey is but the reverse flow of the international drug trade. As both Turkish and Italian investigators are discovering, this illicit guns-for-drugs trafficking is run by a "Mediterranean mafia" made up of underworld criminals as well as "individuals above suspicion"—politicians, bankers, and other public figures. The networks of this mafia stretch from Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Syria, and Iran, to Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy. It is with this drugs-weapons traffic that international terrorism nourishes itself, and on which the mafia thrives—to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

How can a black market of such immense proportions exist? Only with the complicity of key state authorities, major corporations, and banking houses, which, from the top, are actively facilitating the illegal trafficking or which, for a price, look the other way as dope and weapons go in and out of their country.

For example, Italian investigators have uncovered the role of Stipam International Transports, a Milan-based firm responsible for conducting huge quantities of arms into the

Middle East in exchange for drugs, in cooperation with the Italian and Turkish mafias.

Italian authorities are also looking into the role played by Banco Ambrosiano, Italy's largest privately owned bank, in the diversion of American-made weapons from Israel to Iran, in exchange for the delivery of Iranian oil to Israel. The effects of this secret transaction, in which the Kissinger-dominated State Department is known to be complicit, have not been insignificant: the infusion of U.S. arms into Iran from Israel has galvanized Khomeini's war-and-destabilization drive in the Persian Gulf, while Iranian oil has fueled—literally—Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

Now, investigators in Italy, with the help of Turkish officials, are closing in on another important angle: the Turkish-Bulgarian organized crime connection, and its interface with the Italian mafia.

## Agça and Antonov

When Italian police arrested Serge Ivanov Antonov, a Bulgarian tourism official, in Rome Nov. 25 for his suspected role in last year's assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, a crucial piece of the international terrorism and organized crime apparatus was dramatically brought to light.

Antonov worked out of the Rome offices of Balkan Tourist, the travel agency of the Bulgarian national airline. Balkan Tourist shares offices with the commercial attaché of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, who is one of two other Bulgarian officials now being sought by Italian police in connection with the attempted murder of the Pope. According to Italian and Turkish press accounts, Antonov was in close touch with Mehmet Ali Agça, the would-be killer of the Pope, prior to Agça's May 13, 1981 attack. There is evidence that it was Antonov who reserved the hotel room in which Agça stayed while in Rome, and that on the day of the hit Antonov was in St. Peter's Square with Agça.

As was revealed shortly after the assassination attempt, Mehmet Ali Agça spent considerable time in Bulgaria after his escape from a Turkish prison in 1980. In fact, it was while Agça was staying in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia at

the Hotel Vitosa that he was offered 3 million deutschmarks to kill the Pope by leading Turkish mobster Bekir Celenk, who was staying at the same hotel. (Celenk, who is wanted by both the Italian and Turkish police, is currently being safehoused in Bulgaria.)

Abuzer Ugurlu, a godfather of the Turkish underworld who is part of the smuggling network tied to the Milan-based Stipam company. Now in jail, Ugurlu maintained an apartment in Sofia, and is known to be close friends with Celenk.

In Turkey, Ugurlu's base of operations is his home town of Malatya in the eastern part of the country. Significantly, Malatya is also Agca's home town.

Ugur Mumcu, a prominent Turkish journalist and professor, has presented evidence that the Bulgarian connection goes beyond Agca and that the terrorism that wracked Turkey until September 1980 when the military took power was a product of the international gun- and drug-running mafias operated out of Sofia.

In a 22-part series titled "Arms Smuggling: Yesterday and Today," which was published by the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* in March 1982, Mumcu exposes the Bulgarian connection and the role of Sofia as the strategic center for drug- and gun-smuggling operations based in both the East and the West.

In particular, Mumcu focuses on the Sofia-Varna-Istanbul triangle, revealing the intricate web of smugglers responsible for arranging the delivery of arms from Bulgaria to Turkey, as well as the distribution network inside Turkey.

Since taking power in 1980, the Turkish army has moved to crack down on this smuggling network. Hundreds of thousands of guns had flooded the country, and Turkey was on the brink of civil war. In the months preceding the military takeover, an average of 30 people were being killed each day in shoot-outs between heavily armed leftist and rightist militants. Both sides were receiving their weapons from the same source.

### **The Kintex connection**

The central clearing house for all smuggling operations into and out of Bulgaria is Kintex, a state-owned export-import company located on Anton Ivanov St. in Sofia. Kintex, Mumcu reveals, works closely with other semi-official Bulgarian institutions, such as Dap-Ik, Interkommers, and Balkan Tourist—the latter being the employer of Antonov, the suspected accomplice of Agca!

In 1974, Turkish law-enforcement officials in Ankara and Istanbul complained that Kintex was operating as a major exchange facility for Turkish heroine and morphine base in exchange for whiskey, cigarettes, and arms. According to Swedish press accounts at the time, the Turkish officials were told to "cool it" when the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington warned that "too much talk about Kintex could jeopardize Bulgarian-American police collaboration."

According to the information presented by Mumcu, arms

reach Turkey through a variety of routes: 1) overland from Bulgaria via long-distance TIR trailer trucks, or by sea from the Bulgarian ports of Varna and Burgaz to Istanbul and other entry points along the Black Sea and Mediterranean coastline; 2) by sea from Beirut to the Turkish port of Iskenderun, Kilis, and Gaziantep; 3) by sea from Italy, Spain, and France.

This last route poses one slight problem. In a letter to Mumcu, convicted Turkish smuggler Ibrahim Telemen explained: "Italy, Spain, and France require licenses (end-user certificates)

Ugurlu's coordinator of smuggling from those countries, was responsible for coming up with the licenses. I would purchase them, for \$25,000 to \$30,000 each, from the United Arab Emirates or from various African countries. With the licenses in hand, I would then acquire tens of thousands of all kinds of weapons and millions of rounds of ammunition. I would then load them on ships as if they were being sent to the U.A.E. or wherever. But once the ship was on the high seas, the boats sailed for Istanbul and the weapons were dumped at Haydarpaşa docks with the cooperation of the Haydarpaşa chief customs officer named Galip and his men. Every month, between 15,000 and 20,000 weapons entered Turkey through Haydarpaşa."

The smuggled weapons reflected a diversity of origins, having been made in both Warsaw Pact as well as NATO countries. Once inside Turkey, the arms were passed on to both leftist and rightist organizations. For example, in the Samsun area in northern Turkey, the chief of smuggling operations there, Ali Acmak, had as his customers both the local branch of the neo-Nazi National Action Party of Alparslan Turkes, and its arch rival, the revolutionary Dev-Yol organization. As Mumcu notes, the arming of both sides by the same source "turns on its head traditional thinking patterns" about "left" and "right" politics.

In his series, Mumcu describes a tight chain of command between Bulgaria and Turkey, presided over by the now-jailed Abuzer Ugurlu, a Kurd. Writes Mumcu: "Osman Imamoğlu (of the Ugurlu "family")

Bulgaria. The connection is made by Avni Karadurmus (a top operative of Abuzer Ugurlu). The deals are made directly with Bulgarian authorities by exchanging code words. Saban Vezir, who lives in Bulgaria, runs the operation there. Inside Turkey, Ali Cakmak handles distribution in the Samsun area. Sami Karamanoğlu runs the operation in the province of Ordu. . . ." And so on.

Much of this network has been crippled by Turkish authorities, just as it is now being crippled in Italy. But the situation is not yet fully under control. Pulling the plug on the Bulgarian connection is perhaps the key.

Mumcu, I am certain, will be the first one to agree to that. "It is a shame for a socialist country," said Mumcu referring to Bulgaria in a recent interview with the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. "I am a leftist, but such revelations as I have made must be made by leftists."