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Posted September 4, 2017 (<http://globalinitiative.net/2017/09/>)

In *Analyzing Organized Crime* (<http://globalinitiative.net/analyzing-organized-crime/>), *Human Trafficking* (<http://globalinitiative.net/human/>)

## Turkey sees rise in human trafficking due to migration - Al Arabiya English

Human trafficking, one of the fastest growing crimes in Turkey, exists because it is profitable and persists in the absence of accountability. Efforts to combat human trafficking essentially came to a standstill after government corruption scandals in December 2013 and February 2014. During this time, the government purged tens of thousands of police officers, prosecutors, judges, and other state officials in retaliation for police investigations that uncovered corruption and links to sponsors of terrorism among high-level officials in the Justice and Development Party—including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his family members, ministers, high-level politicians and bureaucrats. The government's retaliatory actions have decimated the law and justice systems, allowing human traffickers to operate virtually unimpeded. As the crackdown on law enforcement continues, Turkey continues to draw negative international attention. For example, in the U.S. State Department's 2017 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Turkey's efforts to curb human trafficking were criticized.

Prior to the corruption scandal retaliation in late 2013, Turkey's efforts to combat human trafficking were relatively effective. Ever since, the government's priorities have been diverted, particularly to covering any further cases of corruption. This diversion of political will and resources has created a situation where human trafficking, amongst other crimes, can flourish.

The loss of institutional knowledge and experience as a result of the purges has left Turkey ill-equipped to fight human trafficking in many provinces. The province of Igdir, situated along Turkey's far eastern border with neighboring Armenia, the Nakchivan Autonomous Region and Iran, serves as a hub for traffickers and their victims. Despite occupying one of the most productive agricultural areas in Turkey, the city is overrun with oil smuggling and human trafficking. Both crimes are normalized in the province, with many local people engaging in activities related to smuggling and trafficking. For example, the province has more than 20 hotels with nightclubs, hotspots for victims of trafficking forced to provide commercial sexual services.

Law enforcement officials in 2012 and 2013 used Igdir to develop a model for fighting human trafficking that could be used on both a national and a global level. As a result of these efforts, more than half of Turkey's organized-crime investigations were conducted in Igdir. The investigations used wiretapping, surveillance, and the deployment of undercover agents.

The hotel owners in Igdir established these businesses in the late 1990s and transferred mostly Azeri victims from Azerbaijan. However, victims from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have also been identified in Igdir. While Azeri victims were transferred to Igdir because of the hotel owners' links to Azerbaijan, other nationalities were transferred as a result of relationships among victims.

Igdir hotel owners who doubled as human traffickers were well-organized. They built high walls around the hotels and embedded pieces of glass and iron wires over the walls. The objective was not to protect the hotels from thieves but to thwart raids by the police. The hotel owners also deployed watchmen around the properties to monitor police cars that could raid the hotels. Encrypted radios were used for communication. Watchmen in front of the hotel gates checked the identity cards of customers before allowing them to enter the hotel.

Inside some of the hotel rooms, the traffickers set up secret camera systems to blackmail businessmen and state officials. By giving bribes or pro-offering the forced sexual services of victims, the traffickers were able to coerce some officials into informing the traffickers in advance about police raids. These officials and traffickers set up a communication system based on the use of secret code phrases such as, "Did you find the keys?," "Today is very hot.," or "I have stomachache." These codes alerted the traffickers about upcoming raid, prompting them to hide victims and evidence of prostitution.

Igdir traffickers are brutal toward victims. They extort money from victims, force minors to perform sexual services, and force pregnant women to have sex with customers. They even provide hormones to victims to delay the onset of their menstrual periods.

The police attempted to investigate these traffickers in late 2011, but word about the raids leaked, forewarning traffickers. Given the perpetrators' well-networked and well-organized systems, the raid's failure is unsurprising. Undeterred, the police regrouped in early 2012, establishing a more professional and reliable system that prevented leaks and had the capacity to analyze transnational characteristics of human trafficking groups operating in Igdir. The new plan was to conduct an organized crime investigation which, under Turkish law, allows for the use of wiretapping, surveillance and the deployment of undercover agents.

The new investigations launched in early 2012 involved well-trained undercover agents who were successful in infiltrating the hotels under the guise of wealthy businessmen. Being suspicious about government agents, some traffickers hired psychologists to test the identities of agents; however, the agents were skilled at keeping their true identities secret. The investigations gathered solid evidence on how the traffickers operated, how they transferred victims, how they forced victims to have sex, how they were linked to corrupt law enforcement officials, and how they transferred and laundered profits.

The agents found that human trafficking is linked to many types of crimes in Turkey. Firstly, they saw that corruption among customs and law enforcement officials enables human trafficking. Secondly, human trafficking is associated with blackmail because traffickers blackmail businessmen and high-level state officials in hotel rooms equipped with hidden cameras. Thirdly, the agents uncovered cases of debt bondage. For example, traffickers put their victims in debt bondage to forcefully obtain the victims' money, confiscated victims' passports, and forced victims to live in low-quality apartments. Fourth, the agents reported counterfeiting cases. Kyrgyz victims, for example, were forced to use counterfeit travel documents as well as real passports issued in different names but with the same photograph. Fifth, the human traffickers had direct contact with human smugglers. When the victims were deported, it would take only a few days for those same victims to reenter the country thanks to the relationship between smugglers and traffickers. Victims did not want to be deported because they believed that their deportation only served to perpetuate their debt bondage. The human traffickers, for example, pay \$1,500 for a victim and then force the victim to work in the sex sector.

It was determined that while the traffickers laundered money in construction companies and car dealerships or transferred it in cash to Azerbaijan, the victims used several currency-exchange offices and jewelry stores affiliated with hawaladars (i.e., individuals who act as agents in an informal and unregulated system to transfer money across borders) to send money they earned to relatives abroad. Some victims instead used state banks with branches outside of Turkey. After depositing a small amount of money, relatives in their home countries withdrew the funds with debit cards.

The investigations also exposed how the victims were exploited and abused by rogue police officers. For example, victims were raped by police officers in charge of passport controls at border gates. Most Azeri victims travel to Turkey on airlines that landed in Nakchivan from other parts of Azerbaijan late at night. After disembarking, the victims board a shuttle bus from Nakchivan to Igdir, Turkey. Police officers remove victims from the shuttle for trivial reasons, rape them, and then return them to the bus for the ride to downtown Igdir. In one case, the investigators recorded a statement from a bus driver describing a victim who was hospitalized after being forced by several police officers to have anal sex. In the statement, the bus driver said the victim called him because she was bleeding. The driver took the victim to a pharmacy and a hospital. Other bus driver's statements said that they advised victims to dress like Iranian women and not wear makeup because otherwise, the police would remove them from the bus. The exploited victims who feared being deported remained silent and never reported the abuse to the police.

Evidence collected during the investigations had far-reaching implications. All hotel owners were arrested, the police deported more than 300 victims, human trafficking rings were dismantled, and the traffickers' links to corrupt law enforcement officials were unveiled. Money transfers by traffickers and victims were traced, and exchange offices and jewelry stores were investigated by the police. The police also temporarily closed the hotels, which later were put on the market for sale. The police, however, were fully aware that while the human-trafficking operation in Igdir had been dismantled, similar operations would likely appear in different cities.

While the investigations were under way, the human traffickers under investigation threatened the police, but the police were undeterred and highly motivated because they knew that that traffickers were perpetrators responsible for many human tragedies.

As a result, an investigative model that included professionalization of law enforcement, prevention of corruption, and increased capacity of the police to make detailed analyses produced effective results in Igdir. The model therefore was used in other cities in 2013.

The December 17 and December 25 corruption scandals, however, had a decidedly negative effect on the anti-trafficking unit in Igdir. Although the December police investigations were conducted lawfully by Istanbul's Financial Investigation Unit, the investigation's team was swept up in the government's country-wide retaliation against law enforcement. All police officers in the Anti-Smuggling and Organized Crime Department (*Kacakcilik ve Organize Suclarla Mucadele Daire Baskanligi-KOM*)—including those officers responsible for fighting human trafficking, were fired, and most were put in jail.

The government's reassignment of previously investigated or convicted police chiefs to critical positions of leadership was the harbinger of the destruction of all crime-fighting models. For example, the newly assigned head of KOM had been investigated and indicted for many crimes, including corruption. Similarly, the newly assigned chief of police in Igdir had been previously-investigated in a prostitution case. The government deliberately assigned police chiefs linked to crimes because the government's strategy was to control the new police chiefs and take revenge on former police officers who investigated the new chiefs' criminal acts.

What happened to the new and effective model for fighting human trafficking in Igdir? The answer is simple. It took two years to train police officers, to teach them how to protect themselves from corrupt relations, and to use effective criminal procedures and police tactics, but it took only a few days to destroy it all. Similar to other provinces, all KOM, antiterrorism, and intelligence police officers in Igdir were suspended and fired. Even the witness protection program that shielded several former police chiefs from the threats of traffickers was unlawfully repealed. Their guns were confiscated, and their address information was given to traffickers by newly assigned police officers. All human traffickers, smugglers, and convicted law enforcement officials in jails were released. Unfortunately, brave prosecutors and well-trained and professional police officers who conducted human trafficking investigations in Igdir were among the thousands of officials who were put in jail. The traffickers reopened the hotels and resumed the abuse of human trafficking victims. The investigations of rapist police officers were dropped, and they continued to work at the border gate.

The Igdir case shows how political corruption has dire consequences in the fight against human trafficking. Because the priority of corrupt politicians is to avoid reinvestigation of their illegal activity, well-established crime-fighting systems that result from long-term efforts can be destroyed by the politicians.

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