

## Who's Turkey's bad guy?

From the 16th-century mythical Koroğlu to mid-20th-century Kurdish hero Koçero, Turkey has a long list of beloved bandits fighting against injustice. Is Sedat Peker a throwback to this tradition of noble rebellion?

Friday June 25 2021



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In Brian de Palma's 1983 blockbuster *Scarface*, one of Hollywood's best villains Tony Montana, portrayed by Al Pacino, loses control at a luxurious restaurant after a bitter quarrel with his wife, and gives a drunken and drugged soliloquy, defying the concept of "decent society" which is constituted by "good" people:

"What you lookin' at? You all a bunch of f\*\*ing a\*\*holes," he shouts, "You know why? You don't have the guts to be what you wanna be. You need people like me. You need people like me so you can point your f\*\*in' fingers and say, 'That's the bad guy.' ...You're not good. You just know how to hide, how to lie. Me, I don't have that problem. Me, I always tell the truth. Even when I lie. So say goodnight to the bad guy!"

Montana's speech is directed against the hypocrisy of America's upper classes. In his admission of being the "bad guy," the criminal gang leader feels superior to these so-called honorable members of society, who, he claims, merely pretend to be good by hiding their true selves.

Today, a real mafia boss, Sedat Peker, echoes the same sentiment in tell-all YouTube videos, which have dynamited Turkey's domestic politics. While making sensational allegations about corruption, murder, and drug trafficking against some of the country's most powerful figures, Peker seeks to convince his ever-growing audience to be on guard against those who call for a "clean society."

"There is no clean society," says Peker as a graduate of the school of life, and advocate of the motto "all people are dirty, particularly those who touch power." Niccolo Machiavelli, the 16th-century diplomat, philosopher and politician, provides insight as to why Peker could be right: In his most famous work, *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises the rulers not to be good but to look good: "[If] a Prince has and invariably practices all the good qualities ... they are hurtful, whereas the appearance of having them is useful."

Peker, who has fled Turkey to avoid prosecution, seems dead set to prove that there are only a handful of good men—or clean politicians, businessmen, and journalists—in Turkey. Each video he releases adds a new one to the corruption list as he names and shames the figures whose dealings he has known. More than 10 million Turks watch his videos, some over and over again. According to Istanbul-based pollster's weekly Turkey report, 72 percent of Turks interviewed believe that the judiciary should investigate the claims made by Peker, showing that there is growing reluctance to dismiss what he says as gibberish from a fugitive on the wrong side of the law. The same pollster indicates that support for early elections also increases, almost in parallel.

## The state and its criminal arm

While it is easy to dismiss the ties between the state and criminal organizations as mere political corruption, history points to a state tradition between those in power and groups outside the law.

In his article “Clandestine Service, Historiography and the Origins of the Turkish ‘Deep State’”, Ryan Gingeras demonstrates how the late Ottoman state elite made use of paramilitary groups from the Balkans as an effective means of violence in Anatolia against Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, and other ethnic groups perceived as threats to the state. Even though bandits and paramilitaries played significant roles during the War of Independence, they were eventually integrated into the regular army. Those who resisted being absorbed in the state structure, as did Çerkez Ethem, were declared traitors.

In the 1990s, Turkey's deep state took to the stage with all its stature, when a clandestine network of security officials, bureaucrats, and organized criminal gangs was held responsible for murdering numerous Kurdish politicians and businessmen, murdering several leading journalists and intellectuals in the name of defending the state against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

This cooperation, carried out in the name of protecting the state, is a double-edged sword for the legitimacy of the very entity it aims to protect. To put it in Max Weber's terms, modern states, in order to successfully claim to the “monopoly of legitimate physical violence”, must get rid of these ties in the long run by “cleaning its bowels.” Therefore, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described his “new Turkey” as the antithesis of the 1990s, promising to clean up criminal “gangs within the state.” While he somewhat succeeded in curbing their influence in the first half of the AKP's political power, his alliance with the ultranationalists after the failed coup d'Etat of July 15 2016 led to a resurgence of former elements of the deep state. Mehmet Ağar, whom Peker calls “Deep Mehmet” as the embodiment of the “deep state,” and Peker himself were allowed in the ranks of power and awarded with financial advantages for years.

Previously holding mass rallies in support of the government and fiercely threatening academicians who called for a return to the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question (something he later denied), Peker now situates himself on the opposition side of Turkey's political polarization. Turning a deaf ear to Alaattin Çakıcı, recently-released mafia boss who has strong ties with the AKP's critical ally Nationalist Movement Party, who publicly reminds him of the code of silence (Omertà), Peker has a very strong message: “If I go down, I'm taking everyone with me.”

## Psycho-killer?

If Peker's long monologues in the videos somehow sound disconnected, outrageous and even beyond sanity, it is neither coincidental nor unusual. As Friedrich Nietzsche claims in “The Dawn,” it is always wise to become mad, or at least to appear mad, when one dares to break the rules. Therefore, all mafia figures tend to display psychopathic behavior—often towards each other or their nearest.

For instance, in 1995, Çakıcı contracted the killing of his ex-wife Uğur Kılıç - a mafia figure in her own right -, in front of her son from a previous marriage, Onur Özbizerdik.

Özbizerdik, the grandson of the Mafia don Dünder Kılıç on her mother's side and stepson of Çakıcı, became a psychopathic mafia figure in his own right. Trotting guns from the age of 15 on, he was arrested repetitively for assault on random strangers who “parked their car badly” or “did not allow him into the nightclub,” he once shot at Peker's adopted son, Olgun.

Another notorious duo, the Nuriş brothers (Nuri and Vedat Ergin) murdered Mustafa Duyar, a member of the ultra-left terrorist group DHPK-C who assassinated Özdemir Sabancı in prison in 1999. They then brutally murdered 5 convicts from the rival Çakıcı gang in a prison riot in 2000 right in front of the press, while shouting “this state made me kill Mustafa Duyar.”

Peker's current videos are filled with delirious psychodrama and hints of violence. In one of them, he explains how he threw a knife at his son after he made his daughters cry. He then declares that he sent his “reason to vocation,” that he will “burn the world” for his daughters. But the dramatization, the criminal passion seems to add to his allure.

## The beloved criminal

The idea of beloved criminal is no stranger to Turkey's literature, from the Dede Korkut tale of Deli Dumrul (a mythical bully who extorts money from “everyone who passed the bridge, everyone who did not, and everyone who even raised their voice in protest”) to songs about Köroğlu who took to the mountains to protest the cruelty of Bolu Beg, the local feudal lord.

In the 20th century, two iconic writers, Yaşar Kemal and Kemal Tahir took opposing views on the Robin Hood alla turca. Yaşar Kemal, the famed writer of “Mehmet My Hawk,” emphasized the social protest function of people's admiration for bandits. Kemal Tahir, the author of “State Mother,” reinterpreted it as a sign of desperation of ordinary folk.

According to the former perspective, which was adopted by Eric Hobsbawm in his famous concept “social banditry,” people could transform outlaws into effective symbols of resistance against a predatory government. Whenever a state, which was supposed to protect the community against bandits, turns its “beak and claws” towards the people, outlaws could become symbolic, if not actual, allies of the community.

When the famous bandit Mehmet İhsan Kilit, alias Koçero, was killed in 1964, national newspapers celebrated the “predestined end” of rebellion against the state by publishing the photograph of his corpse, while the native Kurdish peasants mourned the death of their hero, transforming him into a counter-myth against the state elite’s hegemonic myth of the state’s beka (immortality.)

For the latter perspective, on the other hand, the myth of outlaw heroes represents the desperation of the people, who, being unable or worse unwilling to rebel against oppression, mythologized the wretched criminals, who eagerly employ their capacity for violence in the service of powerholders. According to this view, this is merely an illusionary form of rebellion, which represents people’s natural propensity to obedience rather than their anarchic longings to rebel.

But are the high-profile mafia bosses of today heirs to the beloved rebels? Or are they simply cloaking their past complicity with the power-centers only after this cooperation has turned sour? Or worse, are they desperately manipulating information in the hope of restoring the “dirty deal” they had with the state?

In Turkey, leading mafia figures have always strived to improve their PR by claiming that they are the successors of a long-standing tradition of noble outlaws. Çakıcı, for instance, describes himself as “the last Kabadayı” (a Turkish word to say “tough guy”) to assert that he is not at all a mafia boss but the last example of the chivalrous, manly tradition of urban bullies known as “külhanbeyi.” Even though he and the other mafia figures could secure a fanbase amongst the nationalist Turkish youth, they are far from being the lone and noble outlaws of the Ottoman era. After all, as Edmund Burke famously declared, the age of chivalry is long gone.

Sedat Peker’s quest to become the beloved rebel, the man of honor who loves his country and his family, however, may not be sustainable in the long—or even middle—run. Once his revelations lose their novelty, or worse, if he stops making them, his popularity may plummet. On the night of June 13, the Twittersphere went berserk on the question of whether the Turkish security forces had captured the fugitive. “Now that I know he is safe, I can go to bed and sleep,” wrote many Twitter users, expressing amazement that they’d take the welfare of a mafia figure to heart. But could this feeling last?

The fast-paced developments in Turkey may create new anti-heroes. In a country where legitimate voices are stifled, the public may welcome any contrary voice. Despite their potential for destruction, however, these anti-heroes lack the freedom to form new values out of their destruction. This may well be why many writers and thinkers, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche, urge people to stop looking for heroes and to become heroes in their very own lives.

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