SULTAN ABDÜLHAMID II'S REIGN AND THE LEGACY OF THE OTTOMAN SURVEILLANCE STATE

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By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, 12 April 2025

Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign (1876–1909) marked the crystallization of the Ottoman surveillance state. His methods of control, which included the widespread use of informants, ethnic scapegoating, and repression, have left a lasting imprint on Turkish political culture. For over a century, this pervasive espionage has fostered a climate of self-censorship and suspicion, where no one can be sure who is watching or listening.

At the core of this system was the Yıldız İstihbarat Teşkilatı (Yıldız Palace Espionage Bureau), a parallel intelligence apparatus loyal solely to Abdülhamid. It maintained dossiers on political activists, diplomats, foreign missionaries, Ottoman officials, and even members of the sultan's extended family. This fragmented and overlapping surveillance network served a strategic purpose: by preventing any single agency from monopolizing intelligence, Abdülhamid reduced the risk of a coup during a period of imperial decline and rising nationalist unrest.

Abdülhamid's spies relied on a vast network of informants, known as journaliers, from the French word for day laborers, to reflect their daily reporting duties. Their task was to detect dissent, foreign influence, or nascent nationalism. The informants were drawn from the civil service, clergy, teachers, barbers, coffeehouse owners, and students. Teachers and the clergy were among the first to be co-opted. Church sermons were transcribed and analyzed for subversive themes, and Armenian and Greek schools were scrutinized for nationalist or liberal teachings. Those who refused to cooperate faced arrest on vague charges such as 'inciting communal unrest', 'disrespecting the sultan', or simply 'disloyalty'.

Ethnic Armenians and Greeks employed in the civil service, post offices, or the railway were under constant surveillance. Prominent journalists, physicians, lawyers, and school directors from non-Muslim communities were routinely targeted. Their homes were searched, letters intercepted, and movements tracked. Many were imprisoned without trial, and some died in custody under suspicious circumstances. When trials did occur, they were often held in secret, with predetermined verdicts.

To suppress Armenian aspirations and justify crackdowns, Abdülhamid employed provocateurs, false flag operations, and divide-and-rule tactics. He organized Kurdish tribal militias into the irregular Hamidiye cavalry regiments, which raided Armenian villages with impunity. The militias exacerbated ethnic strife, destabilizing Armenian communities and hindering their ability to organize as a united force. Inter-communal tensions deflected blame for the empire's instability.

Abdülhamid extended his intelligence operations abroad, with Ottoman embassies doubling as spy hubs to monitor Armenian and Greek dissidents—particularly the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun) and the Greek Ethniki Etaireia, advocates of the Megali Idea. Bribes and threats were used to silence diasporan newspaper editors and publishers.

Continuity Under the CUP and the Republic

After Abdülhamid's deposition in 1909, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), despite initial promises of reform, adopted and intensified his authoritarian methods. Wartime paranoia led the CUP to establish the Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa (Special Organization), which infiltrated Armenian groups and implemented ethnic engineering policies, including death marches, assassinations, and staged provocations. The organization played a direct role in the Armenian Genocide (1915–1917).

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the sultanate and caliphate, but his regime retained the surveillance apparatus under the guise of modernization. The early Republic maintained a powerful Interior Ministry and gendarmerie, monitoring not only Kurds, Armenians, and Greeks but also leftists, conservative Muslims, the press, and academics. The İstiklal Mahkemeleri (Independence Tribunals) of the 1920s and 1930s prosecuted dissent, while the Citizen, Speak Turkish! campaign reinforced the assimilationist policies. Armenian and Greek minorities remained under suspicion, enduring 'soft surveillance', especially after the Wealth Tax (Varlık Vergisi, 1942) and the Istanbul Pogrom (1955).

Cold War Escalation and the Deep State

From the 1950s onward, as Turkey became a NATO frontline state, surveillance and repression intensified. The Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT, National Intelligence Organization) received CIA training, reinforcing a security-state mindset that targeted leftists, Kurdish movements, labor unions, and religious groups. Military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 were followed by purges and expanded surveillance of journalists, students, unionists, and Kurdish activists. The Deep State (derin devlet)—a shadowy alliance of MIT, the judiciary, and organized crime—operated outside democratic checks, a legacy that persists today.

Erdogan's Surveillance State

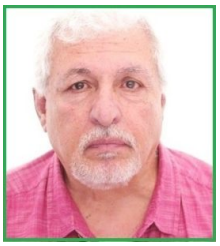
Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the post-2016 coup crackdown saw thousands of civil servants, judges, teachers, and military officers purged or imprisoned. The state employs informants in universities, mosques, and workplaces, while digital journaliers monitor social media for anti-state activity—including tweets, Facebook posts, and even 'likes'. Opposition journalists, academics, and human rights defenders face routine surveillance, harassment, or prosecution.

Conclusion

Turkey's authoritarian reflexes, its paranoia and obsession with internal enemies, originated with Abdülhamid II. The methods evolved under the CUP and the Kemalist Republic, becoming entrenched in modern Turkey's political structures. The culture of surveillance has left a deep psychological imprint: people remain cautious in public, in taxis, online, and even in classrooms. Whistle blowing is rare, and conspiracy theories thrive in the absence of open debate.

From Abdülhamid to Erdogan, the tools of control have adapted, but their purpose—suppressing dissent and enforcing conformity—has remained remarkably consistent for over a century.

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Varouj Pogharian was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His grandparents were from Van, Arapkir and Urfa. His family moved to Canada when he was 18. He retired from the Canadian federal government following a career that included assignments in South America. He is currently working on a historical novel, which is set in Asia Minor during the tumultuous period that spanned the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the rise of the Young Turks. His narrative is poised to explore the complexities of this historical backdrop.

There are no comments yet.