



OZAN KOSE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Exiled Journalist Warns of Turkey's Authoritarian Shift

Two years ago, he was editor in chief of Turkey's largest newspaper. Today he considers himself lucky that he's driving for Uber and not sitting in a Turkish jail like dozens of his colleagues. This is life for those who oppose strong-arm tactics of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

- Joel Hilliker
- [07-05-2018](#)

Imagine that tomorrow the United States government begins shutting down newspapers. It begins manipulating, hassling and even raiding media outlets that it considers insufficiently supportive. Imagine government agents jailing dozens and dozens of journalists and editors for dissent. Imagine the editor in chief of the *New York Times* fleeing the country to escape prison.

This very scenario took place, just two years ago, in one of the world's most populous and powerful nations: Turkey.

Abdülhamit Bilici was editor in chief of the nation's largest daily newspaper, *Zaman*, and chief executive officer of its English-language version, *Today's Zaman*. But on Friday, March 4, 2016, police raided the paper's offices in Istanbul. A court ruling put it under state control. Bilici was fired.

The next day, some 500 *Zaman* supporters gathered in front of the paper's offices. Police repelled them with water cannon and tear gas.

Zaman's website was replaced by a message that the site was being updated to provide "unbiased coverage." Two days later, *Zaman* was back online—with all its previous articles rendered inaccessible. On newsstands, a new edition of *Zaman* appeared. The cover featured a smiling Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The pages were full of articles supporting the Turkish president and his government. But they didn't even mention the fact that the government had just forcibly taken over the paper.

"In 24 hours, they changed the newspaper from a critical voice to a mouthpiece—a propaganda machine," recalls Bilici.

180502 Zaman Editor In Chief Getty Images 513716716 Copy

Abdülhamit Bilici (second from left), editor in chief of Turkish daily newspaper Zaman, talks with his editors and journalists in the newspaper's headquarters in Istanbul on March 4, 2016. (OZAN KOSE/AFP/Getty Images)

Government pressure against Bilici had been increasing for about three years prior to the takeover. After the takeover, his life quickly became unbearable. The government monitored his calls, he was followed, he received threatening phone calls and e-mails. The government had started to revoke the passports of people like him who criticized the regime, so he wasn't even sure he could leave the country.

After three weeks of being spied on and threatened, Bilici went to the airport at 3 a.m. and bought a one-way ticket to Europe. "Luckily, there was no restriction—or the police were sleeping," he says.

Since that day, he has lived in exile from his own country.

Bilici was able to use "similar cautious steps" to extract his family from their home, but two years later, at least 50 of his colleagues at *Zaman* remain in prison in Turkey, and President Erdoğan is seeking lifetime sentences for these journalists and prominent intellectuals. His regime now has more journalists in prison than any other country in the world. It has shut down nearly 200 newspapers, television stations and news websites. Out of 180 nations on the Reporters Without Borders' [World Press Freedom Index](#), Turkey ranks 157th.

Bilici warns that his country, which until *very recently* he considered a model of an open, free Islamic democracy, a bridge between the West and the Muslim world, has now become "a model of how you can lose your democracy in just five years."

A Strongman's World

This transformation in Turkey is not a rare fluke. It is part of a trend that is affecting other major nations. For nearly two centuries, democratic, free societies—led by the British Empire and the United States—have flourished. But modern, sophisticated, wealthy and well-armed nations are now reverting to authoritarianism.

In Asia, Vladimir Putin is dominating Russia, Xi Jinping is dominating China, Shinzō Abe is reviving militarism and nationalism in Japan, and Rodrigo Duterte is bluntly, unapologetically and vulgarly scorning the rule of law in the Philippines. In Europe, record numbers of voters are electing nationalists: Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Sebastian Kurz in Austria, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic. In the Middle East, the flash of optimism during the Arab Spring is over, and the region has emerged even less democratic and free—ruled by autocrats, riven by tribalism and violent turf wars.

By several measures, looked at globally, the power of governments and individual leaders is growing, and the freedoms of people are eroding. People are recognizing that the world is getting more aggressive and more dangerous. People are looking for security and protection. And strongmen are promising to provide it.

In Turkey, that man is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The former mayor of Istanbul, briefly jailed for inciting violence, became prime minister in 2003. He became president in 2014. During the decade and a half he has been in national power, he has significantly boosted Turkey's economy, strengthened its military, and increased its international power. In the early years of his reign, he mostly upheld the tenets of democratic representation and free and open society, in notable contrast to many other Muslim leaders. Many outsiders considered Turkey's success under Erdoğan a model of successful Muslim democracy.

More recently, however, Erdoğan's tone has changed. He is aggressively transforming Turkish society from its once-revered secular state into a nation dominated by Islam. This has meant that the independent media and men who thrived in it, like Abdülhamit Bilici, had to go.

What happened in Turkey is a textbook example of how authoritarianism chokes out freedom.

The newspaper *Zaman* had been founded in 1986 based on journalistic principles of unbiased truth telling. Its principles

were inspired by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric and writer. The newspaper served as an important bridge between disparate sectors of a complex society that began adopting Western democracy only recently. Among the 99 percent Muslim population, *Zaman* promoted a progressive, egalitarian version of Islam, open to interfaith dialogue and at ease with science and democracy. A lot of Turks valued this kind of journalism: With a circulation of 650,000 and a pioneering website, *Zaman* was the most popular, most successful newspaper in the country.

But those same principles threatened the Erdoğan government.

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, known as *AKP*, gradually restricted freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to free assembly. It got even more aggressive after it won a convincing election victory in 2011. Then the trend accelerated further in 2013 with two pivotal events.

In May that year, a group of protesters staged a peaceful sit-in opposing a government plan to replace a park in Istanbul with a shopping mall. The police responded brutally. Many Turks were shocked. A wave of demonstrations rolled across the country, an estimated 3.5 million people in a country of 80 million. Erdoğan forcibly put down the protests with tear gas and water cannons. In the process, 8,000 people were injured, 3,000 were arrested, and 11 were killed. Erdoğan went even further, ordering the media not to report on the protests. Journalists who covered them anyway were fired on orders from the government and even from Erdoğan himself.

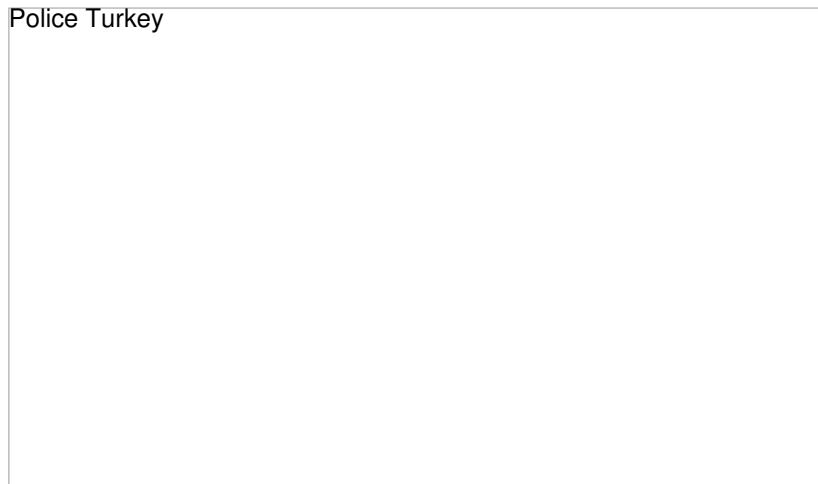
Then in December of that same year, 2013, a police investigation exposed a corrupt scheme being carried out by dozens of members of Erdoğan's party and their families. The scheme involved bribery, fraud, laundering money and smuggling gold. The scandal severely tarnished Erdoğan's image as a clean politician. He responded to these revelations not by reforming his government but by tightening his grip on power. He purged the police force, strengthened his influence over the judiciary, and further subjugated the media to his control. He began referring to his critics as "terrorists."

Life for Bilici and his media colleagues became much tougher after that. When *Zaman* reported on government corruption and authoritarianism, "We started to get threats, and we felt the heat," he says. Authorities began canceling their press credentials so they could no longer cover press conferences and other government events. Inspectors began visiting their offices and hunting for obscure violations. Businesses were ordered to stop buying advertisements in the paper. The judiciary, now controlled by Erdoğan, allowed thousands of lawsuits against the paper's editors and reporters.

Despite the pressure, *Zaman* continued to report what was happening—until Erdoğan deployed what Bilici calls "the nuclear option." Decree number 668 was issued: The paper was seized by government agents, and its employees lost access to internal servers and previously published articles. Its [last independent issue](#) would be an all-black cover with a quote from the Constitution of Turkey and the headline "The Constitution Is Suspended."

This was a major move for Erdoğan's autocratic domination of his country.

Police Turkey



Turkish anti-riot police try to disperse employees at Zaman headquarters in Istanbul on March 5, 2016. (AKIF TALHA SERTTURK/AFP/Getty Images)

‘A Gift From God’

The next summer is when the blood started flowing. On July 15, 2016, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to seize several key sites in the capital and elsewhere. Turks highly respect their military, and since 1960, military leaders have overthrown four duly elected governments for being too religious, in order to protect Turkey's status as a secular country.

For a moment, it looked like time might finally be up for President Erdoğan's regime. But within hours, the effort collapsed. Forces loyal to the president violently repelled the anti-regime soldiers. In the conflict, more than 2,100 people were injured and more than 300 were killed.

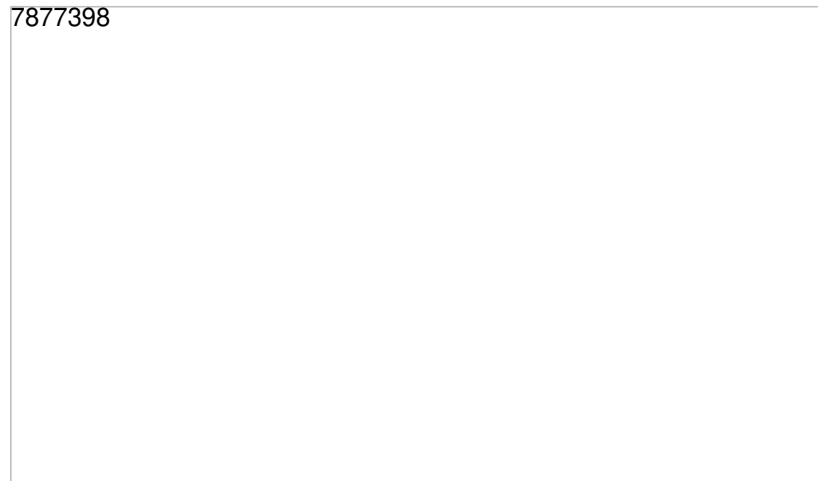
The attempt became what Bilici calls "a caricature of a coup."

President Erdoğan's first public statement about the coup was telling: He called it "a gift from God." And that is how he treated it: Seizing the opportunity to eliminate the last remaining opposition to his rule, he had people arrested and fired by the tens of thousands. Critics have compared it to the Reichstag fire that Adolf Hitler used as a pretense to purge his enemies and crush civil liberties within Germany. The results of the failed coup in Turkey were so beneficial for Erdoğan that many believe he may have allowed or even staged the coup himself.

Whether or not that is true, Erdoğan certainly emerged as a far stronger strongman. Life in Turkey has changed dramatically since the summer of 2016. A group of journalists have compiled stories and statistics about Turkish human rights abuses on a website called TurkeyPurge.com. They say that since July 15, 2016, the Turkish government has shut down 189 media outlets; arrested 319 journalists; closed more than 3,000 schools, dormitories and universities; dismissed 4,463 judges and prosecutors; fired 5,822 academics and some 146,000 state officials and other workers; arrested 77,524 people; and detained 136,995 people accused of having connections to Gülen, an enemy of Erdoğan who now lives in exile in Pennsylvania and for whom Erdoğan blames everything wrong in Turkey—even earthquakes.

Thus Erdoğan has gained absolute control over the judiciary and the military, and virtual control over academia and the press. The state of emergency he declared after the coup remains in effect to this day.

7877398



Clothes and weapons belonging to soldiers involved in the 2016 coup attempt are abandoned on Bosphorus Bridge on July 16, 2016. (Getty Images)

With all his opposition out of the way, Erdoğan felt strong enough to start changing the Turkish Constitution. An apparently growing majority of Turks want their nation to become more openly Islamic, and in Erdoğan they have found a champion for their cause. In a nationwide referendum on April 16, 2017, Turks narrowly voted to pass 18 constitutional amendments that have transformed the nation from a parliamentary democracy into a presidential republic—effectively, an executive presidency. (The referendum vote was tainted by fraud.) Erdoğan can now remain in power for at least another decade in a nation that is increasingly beholden to him. Some observers called it "the death of Turkish democracy."

Last month, Erdoğan decided to move elections that were scheduled for November 2019 up to next month. A victory will cement the sweeping executive powers approved in last year's referendum.

Meanwhile, President Erdoğan had a lavish, 1,000-room, 2 million-square-foot, \$615 million palace constructed for himself, aimed at evoking the glory of the Ottoman Empire.

These moves bring to mind the words of an ancient prophecy [that applies to the modern Turks](#), in the biblical book of Obadiah: "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?"

Why He Is Getting Away With It

As dramatic as Turkey's descent into authoritarianism has been, the nation has faced little pushback from the West. America and European nations have a complicated relationship with Turkey. It is a complex geopolitical puzzle.

Turkey sits at the crossroads of a developing clash of civilizations. Geographically, culturally and economically it is connected to the Middle East but also to Europe. It is a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, yet it is also a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. For decades, it has sought full membership in the European Union.

Turkey is a major nation in global affairs. Its economy is one of the top 20 in the world, the largest economy in the region and the largest Muslim economy in the world. It has an enormous military, the most powerful in the Middle East and ranked by [Global Firepower](#) as the ninth most powerful in the world. After the United States, it is the largest armed force imato, with 890,000 uniformed personnel.

Turkey is a vital energy hub that links Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. It is one of the most geographically strategic countries in the world—a land bridge connecting important and volatile continents. To the west, Turkey borders EU

members Greece and Bulgaria. To the south, it borders Middle Eastern Muslim nations Syria, Iraq and Iran. To the east, it borders the former Soviet nations of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. It flanks the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea and Aegean Sea, and controls the vital Bosphorus and Dardanelles waterways linking Central Asia to the Mediterranean. In a world increasingly driven by energy politics, Turkey is a major crossroads for energy transit.

It has also made itself a valuable holding pen for Middle Eastern migrants making their way toward Europe. Turkey hosts the most Syrian refugees by far: some [3.8 million](#). Germany has made numerous concessions to Turkey in exchange for promises to keep these refugees from flooding into the Continent.

Western nations rely on Turkey's cooperation in defense, transportation, energy, immigration and other ways. To preserve the advantages that Turkey offers, they have shown themselves willing to ignore the country's descent into tyranny.

Occasionally European leaders express frustration over President Erdoğan's behavior, but actions have been soft. In October last year, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the human rights situation in Turkey "absolutely unsatisfactory," but said she wants to "[avoid a showdown](#)," and not "break bridges" with the Turks.

A year ago, President Erdoğan visited President Donald Trump in Washington. While he was at the Turkish ambassador's residence, a small group of protesters appeared outside carrying flags of a Kurdish opposition party. Shockingly, Erdoğan's bodyguards went out and assaulted them—people who were exercising their free speech rights on American soil. This is how dissidents are handled in Turkey, and apparently these men forgot they were guests in America. The perpetrators of the assault, captured on multiple cameras and broadcast on the news, faced no consequences.

Many of Erdoğan's critics are frustrated that other nations fail to hold him accountable. But this is the nature of international politics, and Erdoğan knows how to play the game. He is using all his bargaining chips successfully, exercising his leverage and taking advantage of other nations' opportunism, weakness and lack of principle.

Meanwhile, this powerful nation at the crossroads of East and West is being poisoned and increasingly consumed by anti-America, anti-Israel, Islamic fundamentalism.

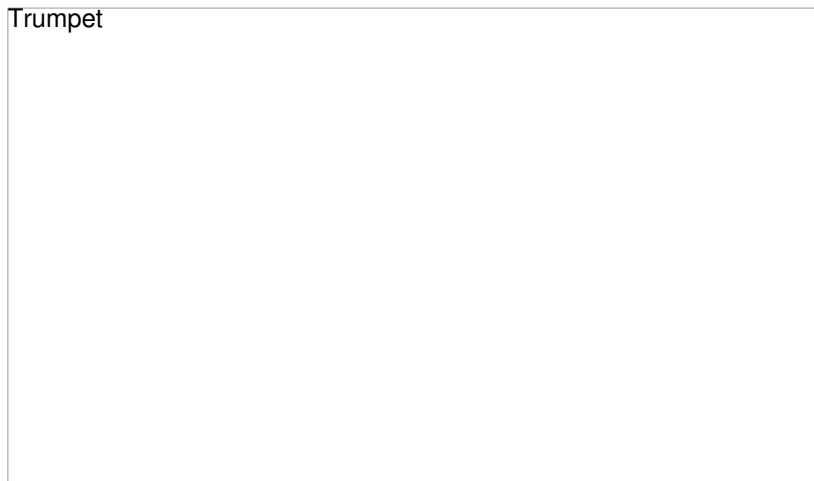
This trend underscores two specific prophecies about Turkey that show it to be a strongly anti-American, anti-Israeli power in this end time: One in [Psalm 83](#), where it is part of an alliance that seeks to cut off the very name of Israel, the other in Obadiah, where the Turks commit [a shocking act of betrayal](#) against Americans and Israelis—in a concession to their allies in Europe. These prophecies also show that Turkey's relationship with Europe, particularly with Germany, will continue to trump other foreign-policy considerations.

The repression swallowing Turkey today is also a stark picture of the world's descent into an age described in biblical prophecy as the "[times of the gentiles](#)."

A Journalist in Exile

Abdülhamit Bilici considers himself fortunate to have escaped from what he calls the "open prison" of his home country. "Never think what occurs in remote corners of the world doesn't relate to you," he says.

Trumpet



Abdülhamit Bilici visited Oklahoma City, including the Trumpet's offices in Edmond, on April 24.(Trumpet)

"It's so dramatic, you know. You are editor in chief of the largest newspaper, and then becoming a poor guy, having nothing. You are losing your house, your assets, your career. Everything is destroyed. It's like a death," he says. "And then you [have] to start everything from zero. This is a struggle. But meanwhile, I try to see myself in comparative terms with my friends, who are not as lucky or not as fortunate as me—in the sense that they are still in jail, and they are not even able to find lawyers, and they are facing lifetime sentences. So compared to that, I feel myself very lucky. And of course from the other dimension, I try to understand that this is not the first time on Earth a person is facing persecution because of his ideals or principles or honor."

Now living in America, when Bilici isn't speaking and trying to raise awareness of what is happening in Turkey, or searching for a job in media or academia, the former editor in chief of *Zaman* works as an Uber driver.

"I am very sad to tell all those things about my beautiful country," he says. "I am taking a huge risk by speaking out. But I must do that." ■

No NI

