
Turkey's 'most courageous newspaper'

By Roy Greenslade

Guardian/UK - 2/1/2009

Taraf, a small-circulation liberal daily launched in November 2007, is currently regarded as "Turkey's most courageous newspaper". It may sell only 60,000 copies a day - but it has won a reputation for breaking stories that no other paper dares to touch.

Most notably, it has been pursuing a sinister story about the links between a shadowy ultra-nationalist gang known as Ergenekon and a branch of the Turkish military. Ergenekon is suspected of carrying out extra-judicial killings in Kurdish areas. The paper has also dared to affirm the Armenian genocide.

The paper is the subject of a lengthy article by Suzy Hansen in today's issue of The National, the UAE-based daily. She reports:

"Taraf owes its boldness to a luxury that is increasingly rare - and not just in Turkey: an independent owner who does not interfere with the work of his editors. Taraf's founder Basar Arslan, a 40-year-old bookstore owner and publisher, wasn't particularly active in politics before launching Taraf, and he still shies away from the public eye...

"He called up a few of his friends to recruit them to produce a small daily that represented their liberal views, what he envisioned as 'a very prestigious, independent paper, according to Yasemin Congar, [deputy] editor, who added: 'Now he loves it.'"

He must do because it is reputed to cost him £342,000 a month to publish Taraf, and Turkish corporations have recently announced that they will not advertise in the paper, supposedly out of fear. Now the paper's few ads usually appear on a single page.

Taraf's many critics, including those at the highest levels of government and the military, have suggested that the paper is secretly funded by Islamic groups. But there is no sign of Islamist sympathies in its pages. However, there is persistent criticism of the military and of its dealings with the Kurdish population.

Jenny White, an academic who has written extensively on Turkey and lives on-and-off in Istanbul, says: "I'm amazed it hasn't been shut down."

But neither Taraf's declining financial fortunes nor the threat of anti-speech trials seems to worry the staff. Congar said: "We receive e-mail threats, personal death threats - I do, and Ahmet does, and probably some of the columnists do."

(Sources: Der Spiegel/The National/The Guardian/Wikipedia)
