

Taraf : a newspaper waiting for arrival of Gen. Godot

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Only a four-month old newspaper, daily Taraf has become a leader in generating controversial stories and publishing secret documents, which is why it continues to do its job while waiting for a possible raid over just another story.

Only a few months old, the liberal daily Taraf has emerged at the forefront and often at the center of political controversies rocking the country, with the staff watching each day over its collective shoulder for a raid that has yet to come.

The name of the newspaper, literally "side," implies "taking sides." And Taraf, aggressively challenging the military, is certainly doing that. Yesterday, the mood at the newspaper could almost be lifted from a page of Samuel Beckett's famous play, "Waiting for Godot." As in the play, the plot at Taraf turned on the questions of when, if or never.

For days, the newspaper has been in a standoff with Turkey's powerful military over publication of leaked documents. A demand to turn over such documents, and an implied police threat to raid the newspaper's offices in place since last Thursday appeared to ease somewhat yesterday. The newspaper shortly before 6:00 p.m. turned over documents whose contents had already been published but the question lingered: Will the gesture be enough? "It's not so much a newspaper as it is a think tank that issues provocative daily bulletins," opined one well-known columnist at a more traditional newspaper. "You can say what you want about Taraf, but nobody can deny that they are gutsy." Yesterday, the staff was trying to take the lingering threat of a raid, or even closure in stride. But the tension was nonetheless palpable. "I only worry about my personal photos, information, e-mails and stories that I am working," said Gürkan Öztekin, a reporter and editor.

"We believe that they will copy the hard disks and maybe search around for the written documents." The "they," of course, are the police or military that have threatened to seize the newspaper's records if its editors don't comply with an order to divulge the source of leaking information about a terrorist attack that the newspaper has alleged the military brass failed to prevent. On June 25, Taraf published a confidential military document that alleged the Office of the Chief of General Staff knew about a pending raid on the Dağlıca army post in October of last year by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, beforehand. But the secret document implied, the military failed to take necessary precautions. The result was the death of 13 soldiers and the kidnapping of another eight to Iraq. Those soldiers were then arrested on their return and charged with not resisting the PKK and illegally leaving the country. The raid, the kidnapping and the charges against the soldiers is just one of the many debates that have rocked Turkey in recent months. After the front-page story, the first response of the military was to admit that such a document existed. But the brass added that it had issued the necessary warnings beforehand. The military also added that the person responsible for leaking the document had been identified, implying action to follow. And then last Thursday, the military prosecutor's office demanded that the daily hand over all secret documents, including the Dağlıca document. Nothing doing, said Editor-in-Chief Ahmet Altan. He and his team waited until the early hours of Friday after a deadline for compliance passed for a raid. Since then, the newspaper staff has been coming to work each day wondering if this was to be the day the hammer would fall. Again, yesterday, it did not.

With its limited budget and modest offices in the Kadiköy district on the Asian side of Istanbul, Taraf is a newspaper in a state of anticipation. But no one seems quite sure what to anticipate. Entering the

newspaper, one passes through a bookstore, giving the daily an intimate, scholarly feel at odds with the tension. "We work in a newspaper with the biggest library," said Yıldırım Oğur, a Taraf columnist in joking reference to the bookstore entryway. The editor, Altan, is also one of Turkey's best-known novelists. Once through this bookstore, one then climbs four floors to reach the newsroom itself. Altan yesterday declined to comment on the war of nerves he is waging with the military and turned down an interview request from the Turkish Daily News.

But the journalists of Taraf are expecting more excitement soon as the military prosecutors' office has charged the documents were illegally leaked to the press, suggesting legal action - even a closure order - could follow.

Many of the Taraf staff came to the newspaper from the left-leaning daily Evrensel or the magazine Nokta. Evrensel, a Marxist daily, has often been at the center of legal battles and the magazine Nokta was shut down after it printed the diary of a former Navy commander which noted preparations for a military coup in 2004. They said they are made of stern stuff and ready for what happens next.

And they are not alone. Readers are among their primary supporters. "Our readers cook cakes and send them to us," said Oğur adding that support make them very happy. Yesterday, a small group of readers and nongovernmental organizations gathered in front of the newspaper's building in a show of solidarity against a possible military raid. "I read the daily Taraf everyday and we came here to support them," said İlyas Akgül, who invited people to support the daily yesterday through the Facebook Web site. Akgül said those threats can only increase the circulation of the daily and claimed that 100,000 in circulation was expected yesterday. "Taraf gives me an identity," said Can Dölek, a university student waiting to support. Another Facebook meeting for support was scheduled for yesterday afternoon.

"Asking the daily Taraf to hand over documents, that are confirmed by the General Staff itself to be real, in a threatening way, is an intervention to the freedom of press," said Ayhan Küçük, chief of the Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed Peoples, or Mazlumder, Istanbul office. The Taraf journalists feel confident that they did not do any wrong, saying yesterday they seek only to bring important matters to the light of day.

"Those eight soldiers [kidnapped by the PKK] turned out to be innocent according to reports," said İbrahim Günel, Taraf news editor. "Taraf published real documents and the General Staff confirmed that those documents were real. Taraf said that it would hand over the documents anytime it is demanded by the authorities as soon as we published the documents," he said. Although the daily offered to hand over the documents it published, military statement signed by Zekeriya Duran, a judge, and a vice-military prosecutor of the General Staff, demands "other documents that may be leaked to the daily illegally." The military prosecutor needs to specifically tell Taraf which documents it wants the daily to return, believes Günel. "They might be talking about the Lahika documents, however they should mention it, if they ask for it, said Günel.

The daily Taraf published some secret documents called "Lahika-1" that claimed that the military has plans to purge the conservative Muslims, manipulate the judiciary, and create a military-friendly media.

The Chief of Staff issued a curious disclaimer saying that such a document was not "approved by the high command." Then the General Staff denied the existence of such a plan all-together.

"A raid on our offices may be legally legitimate," Günel said. "But it doesn't mean we can't object to the fact that such things are happening in a democratic country."

Such was the mood yesterday at a newspaper called Taraf.

Sources

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