

## Titan translators far from home

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Tunjay Celik has stopped carrying photos of his 13-year-old son. He doesn't walk through toy stores anymore.

He last saw his son nearly three years ago in Turkey when Celik left for work as a U.S. military translator in Iraq. Now, Celik lives 7,000 miles away in California. He has worked as a cab driver, but is currently unemployed.

Celik's son cannot understand why his father can't return home to Turkey or at least visit.

It's hard for Celik to explain what happened in Iraq – how he made a choice that he says unfairly branded him a traitor in Turkey and turned him into a political refugee in the United States. It's hard to talk about how he fears that returning to his homeland and family could mean prison, torture, even death.



RIC FRANCIS / Associated Press  
Turkey has branded Savas Dalkilic (left) and Tunjay Celik as traitors for interrogations they did for the U.S. military while in Iraq. The men have sued Titan.

The buildup to the Iraq war was under way in February 2003 when Celik heard from a friend that a San Diego defense contractor, Titan Corp., was hiring translators for the U.S. military in southeastern Turkey.

Celik, 43, a good-natured doctor's son who had worked on Turkish TV and as a tour guide, flew down, interviewed and got the job.

"I just wanted to be on the side of Americans to get rid of Saddam," he said.

In mid-2003, Celik and about 40 other Titan translators arrived at a U.S. air base in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk to work with the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade. There, Celik met another Turk working as a translator, Savas Dalkilic, whose life would soon become irrevocably linked to his own.

Today, Celik and Dalkilic (pronounced CHEE'-lik and Dal-KILL'-itch) are suing Titan for allegedly failing to protect them after their jobs upended their lives.

On July 4, 2003, the U.S. Army raided a building in Sulaymaniyah, east of Kirkuk. Army intelligence suggested insurgents were working out of the building, which housed the offices of the Iraqi Turkoman Front, a political party representing Iraq's Turkmen minority. Troops were instructed to detain all people inside and bring them back to Kirkuk.

The raid touched off a diplomatic crisis. The U.S. troops unwittingly rounded up 11 Turkish special forces soldiers. What the out-of-uniform Turks were doing inside the building during the raid remains unclear. But the Turkish government, a NATO ally, was outraged.

Celik was asked to translate a tense face-off between a U.S. Army colonel and one of the Turkish military observers working with American troops in Kirkuk. At one point, the Turkish captain stopped to answer his satellite phone.

"I could clearly hear the Turkish defense minister and his adviser on the phone," Celik said, "screaming, yelling and threatening the Turkish captain about finding the ones who are responsible."

Dalkilic, meanwhile, was on another special assignment: It unfolded in a room at the air base's detention center where, one by one, 11 men caught in the raid were brought in, wearing orange jumpsuits, handcuffs and hoods over their heads, for questioning by U.S. military intelligence.

Dalkilic was to translate the words of his captured countrymen – the 11 special forces troops. But recognizing Dalkilic as a fellow Turk, one colonel told him that serving as a translator under these circumstances was illegal and he would be "severely punished."

Dalkilic, 46, could not understand the conflict between allied troops. "I don't think we would ever have taken a wild guess that this situation would happen," he said in flawless English with a smoker's baritone. He won't reveal anything else about the interrogations.

Turkey's border with northern Iraq is home to fiercely independent Kurds, and Kurdish rebels have launched attacks on Turkish targets from bases in northern Iraq. Turkey declined to allow U.S. troops in to attack Iraq, but following the U.S.-led invasion, Turkey sent military observers to monitor the Kurds and protect the interests of Iraqi Turkmen, who have ethnic ties to the Turks. Some Turkish observers even lived at the Kirkuk air base.

The Turkish observers demanded information from Celik, Dalkilic and the rest of the translators – asking what was said during the interrogations and where the captive soldiers were being taken.

If the translators didn't talk, they were told, they wouldn't be able to go back to Turkey. Several translators did talk and returned home.

"Think about if the situation was reversed and an American refused to provide information vital to the safety or security of our people or our country," Helinka Papison, who managed the Turkish translators, wrote in an immigration court statement. "The penalties in Turkey are far more severe. The least they could expect is to be detained, questioned and/or tortured for a long period of time."

But Celik and Dalkilic realized that telling what they knew was risky. They were on a U.S. base, working for U.S. forces, and Titan had told them repeatedly never to repeat what they knew.

After the interrogations, Celik, Dalkilic and a third translator who is a U.S. citizen, held a meeting in a locked room. All were trembling, Celik said, as they concluded: "We are in something we shouldn't be in."

They woke up Army Capt. Patricia Cawdrey, who worked with the translators, and asked for advice. The decision must be their own, she told them. She mentioned the possibility of asylum if all else failed.

Celik said he believed in what the American forces were doing. They had come all this way to overthrow an evil dictator and had picked him to help. That meant something.

"Sometimes, you forget about your nationality," Celik said. "Sometimes being human and having dignity is more important than anything, trust me." Dalkilic also agreed to continue.

Said Cawdrey in an e-mail response to questions: "The two gentlemen committed themselves so much to the U.S. forces that they continued to do their job even when it became confusing and possibly dangerous for them."

Soon afterward, a Turkish observer showed Celik a document he sent back to the capital, Ankara, that labeled him and Dalkilic as traitors. "And he said, 'I hope they have given you American passports,'" Celik recalled. He later learned that his home in Turkey had been searched.

Asked for comment, a Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman said he had never heard of the case or the two translators.

In their lawsuit, Celik and Dalkilic say Titan failed to deliver on promises to keep them safe.

They describe confusion about where they could live – contending they were dropped off by Titan officials at an Iraqi safe house but were refused entry and, another time, left on the streets of Baghdad.

Worse, Dalkilic and Celik said they learned in late July that Titan wanted to send them back to Turkey. In her statement, Papison, the translators' manager, said superiors told

her in an e-mail "there is no real danger so all Turks must be returned to Turkey." According to Papison, a Titan manager suggested leaving the translators in Germany en route to Turkey and claiming "they just disappeared."

Celik said, "They were trying to get rid of us."

On July 31, 2003, Dalkilic and Celik boarded a U.S. military transport flight, ending up at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. There, they flashed their Defense Department contractor ID cards – and told a stunned immigration agent they wanted political asylum.

They spent the next 3½ months in a U.S. immigration jail in York County, Pa., never hearing from Titan, they said. In November 2003, an immigration judge granted them asylum.

Today, Celik and Dalkilic are seeking damages of at least \$1 million each from Titan and its subcontractor SOS International Ltd. of New York. Their attorney, Paul Hoffman, once headed Amnesty International USA.

The men claim they were promised salaries of \$6,000 a month or more, but were paid only \$1,500 a month. The lawsuit alleges that Titan billed the U.S. government for the translators' services at the higher amount and pocketed the difference.

Spokesmen for Titan and SOS International both declined to comment, saying they don't discuss pending litigation. Titan and SOS have asked a judge to dismiss the complaint. In court papers, SOS said the translators were hired and paid by a Turkish subcontractor.

Titan's translator contract accounted for 15 percent of its \$559 million first-quarter revenue in April. Titan was acquired in June by L-3 Communications Holdings Ltd. of New York. Nearly 150 Titan employees have been killed in Iraq, more than any other U.S. defense contractor, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Meanwhile, Dalkilic and Celik have settled in Southern California, where they struggle to deal with daily life. A woman who met Celik when he served as her guide in Turkey lent him and Dalkilic the use of her vacation condo – a gesture that makes Celik cry as he recounts it. Dalkilic has left behind his mother, brother and a 20-year-old daughter. Being away from his family haunts Celik.

"We miss our lives. Just being no one and nothing is so hurtful," Celik said. "We don't have a past here. Nobody knows us. It's impossible to find jobs. And we don't even know what to do."