



PERSPECTIVES

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The Islamization of Turkey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is focusing his Islamization policy on the education system in his bid to raise a "pious generation". "Jihad" has become a frequent reference in the Turkish regime's rhetoric, while Syrians in the country and in areas controlled by Turkish troops in northern Syria are eating off the same plate. The international community should act to stop a "Turkish bin Laden" in the making and al-Qaeda-like authoritarian rule.

The Turkish regime is gradually transforming into a developed, complicated, and more dangerous version of the al-Qaeda organization. The rhetoric and approach seem convergent or even identical. The difference is that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is leading a country of significant geopolitical importance, not a militant group scattered across Afghanistan's mountains.

If al-Qaeda succeeded in spreading fear across the globe through its terrorist operations, one can only imagine the extreme damage Erdoğan can cause to the MENA region and even the world, particularly in view of his increasing political paranoia and totalitarianism. As he seeks to stay in power indefinitely following a referendum that granted him sweeping powers to run the country largely uncontested, Erdoğan is trying to leave a legacy that will last for decades. To that end, he is using the education system as a repository in which to sow seeds to be harvested later.

The Islamization of the state has been going on systematically, quietly, and slowly for many years, but its pace has increased since the coup attempt in July 2016, with a focus on the education system. Last year, the ruling Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Erdoğan made substantial changes to school curricula, amending more than 170 topics. The Ministry of Education eliminated evolutionary concepts such as "natural

selection" and added subjects related to "jihad". Erdoğan's government fired more than 33,000 teachers and closed scores of schools over claims that they had ties with those involved in the coup attempt. At the same time, it increased the number of religious schools ("imam hatip").

The ministry described the changes as "an emphasis on a values-based education" that promotes Erdoğan's goal of raising a "pious generation". AKP MP Ahmet Hamdi Çamlı stated last year that "it is useless to teach math to students who do not know jihad". Prior to the overhaul, the number of students in 537 religious secondary schools reached 270,000 in 2012. In 2017, there were 1,408 and 635,000 students. When we add the 122,000 students attending religious schools in the open education system, the number of students in all religious schools in Turkey reaches 757,000.

Erdoğan has noticeably increased the number of Islamic references in his speeches. He made "jihad" the fountainhead of the war on the Kurdish city of Afrin in Syria, using verses from the "Al-Fath" chapter of the Koran. That chapter uses the Prophet Muhammad's victory over his enemies to justify military operations. Friday prayer sermons called for "jihad" against the Kurds. When the Turkish army captured Afrin, Erdoğan did not hesitate to call his troops "Islam's last army".

Two months ago, during a televised congress of his party, Erdoğan invited a little girl in military uniform onto the stage and told her she would be "martyred" if she were killed while fighting. Several weeks ago, Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ described Erdoğan as a leader "who exerts himself for the sake of God". Last year, Şevki Yılmaz, a columnist for the government mouthpiece "Yeni Akit" and a close confidante of Erdoğan's, described al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden as a "national hero". Yılmaz also said voting "yes" to the constitutional referendum to replace the parliamentary system with a presidential one would be to act as the "Ababeel" did. In the Koran, the Ababeel were heavenly birds sent by God to throw rocks on an army that marched upon Mecca intending to demolish the Kaaba.

All the above comes in parallel with a growing number of public attacks on women under the pretext of that they are wearing "inappropriate clothes". A video circulated on December 31, 2016 showed two bearded young men handing out leaflets to passersby in the city of Izmir on the prohibition of New Year's celebrations in Islam.

The issue does not only affect Turks. Around half a million Syrian students in Turkey are influenced by Erdoğan's education policy. Authorities ignore, and sometimes encourage, practices of Syrian school administrations in Turkish cities that focus on religious topics, employ veiled women only, prohibit

teachers from wearing nail polish, and enforce a strict Islamic dress code for female students.

The picture is similar in schools in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria, where the Turkish state is following a policy of Islamization and Turkification. Many of these schools are named after Turkish military officers killed during battles in Syria, while the Turkish language is imposed as the language of education. Around 170,000 students in these areas go to schools that have been restored through a campaign called "Take Your Brother's Hand". Aid and education material for the campaign were provided by IHH, an organization linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and which was the owner and operator of the three flotilla ships that were involved in the convoy meant to breach the sanctions slapped on Hamas in Gaza in May 2010. IHH has also shipped weapons to Islamic factions associated with al-Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood in northern Syria, according to leaders of some factions and Russia's late UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin.

The rise of jihadists in Syria and Iraq, partly as a result of official Turkish facilitation, has provided a fertile environment for radicalism to grow in a Turkish society already divided amid complaints of marginalization and political exclusion, with the arbitrary dismissal and prosecution of nearly 152,000 civil servants and teachers accused of sympathizing with the coup, based on UN reports. This could drag Turkey into civil war. It should be recalled that there are around 25 million weapons in the country, at least 85% of which are unlicensed. It is thus not surprising to witness incidents like the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara in 2016.

If the international community does not deal with the fact that Erdoğan is turning into a Turkish bin Laden who seeks to fulfill his resurrectional vision, it will have to face the dire consequences with which he threatened Europeans last year: that they "will not be able to walk safely on the streets across the world".

Rauf Baker is a journalist and researcher with expertise on Europe and the Middle East.

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