

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during November 1-15th 2013

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Key Points:

- *The Prime Minister's list of concerns grows as he rounds on cohabitation between male and female students in both state-run dormitories and private residences.*
- *It is a bizarre, if understandable issue to focus on, with the conservative Erdogan likely playing to social issues to stir up his base ahead of election season.*
- *A second theory behind Erdogan's sudden concern for students' lifestyles may be due to an ongoing split with the Gulen movement given its ownership of private schools and dormitories.*
- *Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq agree to a pipeline deal, but all may not be lost for Baghdad as practical concerns necessitate cooperation for all parties.*

Turkey's Evolving Islamism: How Far Is Too Far?

Turkey's geographic location leaves it at a crossroads when it comes to dealing with the ills surrounding its contentious regions. In the late 1990s, ethnic conflict in the nearby Balkans was a concern, as was the rise in bloodshed stemming from the state's clashes with the PKK. During this period, the country remained stable due in large part to the military's strong ties with its NATO counterparts. A strong military was a problem itself however, best exemplified in the 1997 bloodless coup against the democratically elected Islamist government of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan.

In this century Turkey has been buffeted by consequences from the disastrous 2003 U.S. invasion in Iraq, the economic and financial 'shocks' in the neighboring Eurozone, and most recently the Syrian Civil War. Over the last decade, its stability has hinged on the steady leadership of the AKP under Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan. His government has done the unthinkable in relegating the military to their proper role in a democratic society while overseeing a period of record economic growth and stability. Given this, one is left questioning the new focus of Islamist Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan.

In a party speech in early November, Erdogan criticized the living situations inside mixed-gender dormitories and living areas. The prime minister has said he will urge that such arrangements be banned in public universities. He later hinted that the security forces may move against similar living situations in off-campus housing (Baydar, "Erdogan stirs controversy on women in university housing," www.al-Monitor.com, 6 November 2013).

"Insufficient dormitories create many problems. Female and male university students are staying in the same residence without being supervised," said Erdogan. "It is against our conservative-democratic line. I gave instructions to the governor on the issue. They will in some way be inspected."

He alluded to concern from parents who have sent their children off to school who are troubled about the living situation as justification for the sudden concern. His take on the matter was echoed and

amplified by AKP underlings like Interior Minister Muammer Guler. The interior minister announced that in rather bizarre logic, terrorist organizations were abusing the co-habitation situations for recruiting purposes. (Champion, "Turkey's Cleavage Crackdown Goes to College," Bloomberg, 12 November 2013).

AKP spokesman Huseyin Celik gave his opinion as well by calling the dormitories dens of prostitution. As Bloomberg's Marc Champion points out, this was the same spokesman who was behind the complaints that saw a popular television host fired for wearing a low cut dress on her program.

The more pragmatic wing of the party, under AKP co-founder and current Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc tried to spin the prime minister's remarks. Yet Erdogan would not be mollified, and later told reporters that he stood by his comments.

If the sudden emergence of a vice scandal in Turkey's dormitories seems like it came out of the blue, it is because it most certainly did. The Republic is entering an election cycle that will run for more than a year, and in a lowest common denominator strategy, Erdogan is again pandering to his socially conservative base. The absurdity of the charges leveled by the country's leader on such a trivial matter reek of political gamesmanship.

Even giving the prime minister the benefit of the doubt that such a problem exists, surely such an issue is below the purvey of the country's top official.

While he consolidates his conservative base, Erdogan has done something that would have been unlikely otherwise by uniting the nationalist MHP and Kemalist CHP opposition. Each party's leader condemned the accusations, with CHP head Kemal Kilicdaroglu telling worried parents to simply "ignore what the dictator says."

While uniting two of the main opposition parties, he may have incidentally widened a rift in his own. Such moral indignation and interference into the private lives of Turkish citizens is beginning to grate on some inside the AKP, who while opposed to the reactionary

secularism of Turkey's past, believe the prime minister's conservative agenda is beginning to enter stages of overreach.

The less divisive President Abdullah Gul is drawing support away from Erdogan with some AKP members despite technically being out of the party due to his ceremonial role (Arango, "After a Break, Turkey's Prime Minister Again Courts Controversy," The New York Times, 7 November 2013). Arinc himself is said to have been insulted by the prime minister's doubling down on his statements, in which he essentially rebuked the deputy prime minister in public.

While the ploy does reek of political opportunism, it is legitimate to question whether the prime minister and the party he leads are now intent on shaping the entire country with their conservative Islamist ideology. His remarks saying that there are "legitimate and illegitimate lifestyles" to press during a visit to Finland are disconcerting. The recent passage of alcohol restrictions coupled in Istanbul's once-vibrant night scenes are another example, though such laws are in place in many Western countries as well.

A pious Muslim and an astute politician, Erdogan will continue to push for social changes that reflect he and his constituents' view on morality. Yet as the dormitory example indicates, how far is too far? For now the most likely opponent of such an overreach will come from within his own party, but if he continues on his current path, he may risk splitting the AKP entirely.

Gulen-AKP split?

One interesting take on the prime minister's remarks was some observers' theory that it was reflective of the ongoing tension between the AKP and the Gulen movement. The U.S.-based Islamist scholar Fethullah Gulen has a wide network of schools across the globe. In Turkey, the Gulen movement operates a number of preparatory schools called "dershane" that provide additional instructions for high school students taking the national exams required to enter university.

According to 2012 figures of the Union of Chamber and Commodity Exchanges in Turkey, there are 4,055

such schools serving 1.2 million students. It is unclear how many are funded by the Gulen movement, but it appears that the number is significant.

Some of these schools provide living quarters, like dormitories, for their students as many classes take place over the weekends. Though he never named these schools in his remarks on cohabitation between males and females, Erdogan's government has recently moved against the dershanes.

Education Minister Nabi Avci told attendees at the government's early November Consultation and Evaluation Meeting that his ministry would close the schools by 2015.

Erdogan echoed his minister's remarks, saying the schools "are an obstacle in providing an equal opportunity in education." ("Turkish government determined to close private tutoring schools," Daily Hurriyet, 5 November 2013).

Deputy Minister Arinc and President Gul are seen as closer to the movement than the prime minister. The split with Arinc (see above section) and a possible challenge from Gul for the leadership of the party and country may have begun.

By closing the schools in such a rapid manner, Erdogan and his supporters are seeking to cut off an important breeding ground for opposition within his own conservative, Islamist ranks. It appears that with the rabid secularists largely inconsequential on the domestic political scene, the once tight bond between pious, conservative Turks that account for the majority of the AKP's voters may be unraveling as they turn on one another.

Turkey-KRG Energy

In early November, Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq reached agreements to build oil and gas pipelines for the region's energy resources. Currently the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline carries around 1.6 million barrels per day, while Turkish-owned Genel is shipping 40,000 barrels a day overland by truck from the autonomous Iraqi region to Turkey.

KRG Energy Minister Ashti Hawrami remarked to reporters that Erbil aimed to become a major exporter

alongside others in the region, predicting that it would export two million barrels a day by 2020 (Peker, "Kurds, Turkey Edge Toward Oil Deal", The Wall Street Journal, 31 October 2013).

Talks reportedly centered on the construction of two additional pipelines. The first would connect the southern Iraqi Basra fields to Ceyhan, a project that would seek to remove the reliance on traversing the sometimes unstable Persian Gulf. The second proposed line would run from the Taq Taq field in the KRG to Ceyhan.

While the ties between Erbil and Ankara in energy relations have been much lauded, this platform included, Al-Monitor's Denise Natali raised legitimate questions about the "independence" of the KRG pipeline (Natali, "How independent is the Iraqi-Kurdish pipeline to Turkey," www.al-monitor.com, 4 November 2013).

As Natali points out, though the pipeline is within the KRG's territory, it will have to be linked to the current Iraqi transport infrastructure. Turkey's southeast lacks the requisite infrastructure necessary for the KRG's line to link with the pipelines running to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Once the crude enters the Iraqi system, it technically belongs to the national government. More so, Turkey has said that it will pay the appropriate body - in this case being the Oil Ministry in Baghdad - and leave the dispute resolution up to the Iraqis. Keeping track of the amount of Kirkuk

shipped oil is done by Iraqi State Official Marketing Organization representatives located at the port of Ceyhan.

The practicality of the matter seems to be drawing the KRG and Turkey closer together, but also, the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. With an eye on Syria and continued terrorist attacks rocking Iraq, all parties appear to be moving closer to a solution that will appease, though not please each.

Despite the tactical understanding that the White House is opposed to the KRG-Turkey agreement, al-Maliki knows his security forces are unlikely to triumph over the battle-tested Kurdish peshmerga if the conflict boiled over. As bombings continue to rock Baghdad and elections approach, a low key resolution with Erbil is the best outcome for the Iraqi leader.

As for Turkey, its ever-growing account deficit is largely due to expensive energy imports. Any measure to alleviate such a problem is seen as necessary. As long as the oil and gas supplies are flowing, payments will be made. But such a need will not come at the expense of igniting a second civil war on Turkey's border. When Prime Minister Erdogan met with Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani in early November, he likely explained just how far Turkey was willing to go in backing the Kurds in their conflict with the central government. Ankara, Erbil and Baghdad need one another more than they need another armed conflict.

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