



Turkey Report

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The AKP and the Gülen Movement: Old Friends New Foes (?)

The governmental plan to abolish the private teaching institutions which are the Gülen movement's main source of income has unveiled an escalating tension between the AKP and the religious community. The first signs of disagreement appeared on February 7, 2012 in Istanbul when the specially authorized prosecutor Sadrettin Sarıkaya summoned some important MIT officials (undersecretary Hakan Fidan, ex-undersecretary Emre Taner and ex-deputy assistant secretary Afet Güneş) for his investigation on the KCK case. The government passed a new law in order to protect MIT officials when it was rumored that the prosecutor would ask the chairman of the MIT himself about the negotiations with the PKK in Oslo. The Gülen movement expressed its discomfort towards the AKP's approach concerning the Kurdish issue. According to them, the state policies protected the PKK and allowed it to get stronger in their areas of influence. Meanwhile, there were voices within the AKP complaining about the significant influence of the Gülen movement in sensitive areas of the state such as Security and Justice. According to them, some innocent people (e.g. Nedim Şener and Ahmet Şık) were added to the Ergenekon case's list by the Gülen movement in order to damage the AKP's prestige. Furthermore, on August 13, 2013 the religious community added fuel to the fire by stating that they were not related to any political party and they did not support the government on the "Gezi Park" issue. Thus, the aforementioned frictions led to the recent open conflict between the movement and the AKP about the government's intention to shut down private schools.

The Gülen movement and the Zaman newspaper have been expressing their strong objection to the reform plan. According to Taraf newspaper's report on the dispute, the government gave approval to the National Security Council's action plan against the Gülen movement. Emre Uslu, opposition columnist from Today's Zaman, argued that closing enterprises such as the private prep schools is against democracy and liberal economy. The government is not only concerned about the Press' reactions but about some politicians as well. AKP's Kütahya deputy, İdris Bal, who opposed the government's plan to close the prep schools, referred to the party's disciplinary board but did not wait for its decision and resigned on his own. In addition, President Gül as well as the opposing CHP and MHP parties demanded from the government to give priority to education issues. On the other hand, the BDP supports the prep schools' closure. According to its leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, prep schools are groups with a secret agenda.

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The Latest Developments on the Kurdish Issue

The Kurdish initiative maintains its top priority for Turkey. The President of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, Mesud Barzani, visited Turkey after 21 years accompanied by the exiled Kurdish musician Şivan Perwer who had not returned to his homeland for 38 years. Their visit had a strong symbolism in an era of power shifts in the Middle East. Tensions have risen among Mesud Barzani's KDP party and Abdullah Öcalan's PKK as well as its affiliated Syrian PYD party.

Barzani and Perwer attended a wedding ceremony of 300 couples and hailed the gathered crowd. Prime Minister Erdoğan talked first and in a rare moment used the taboo term "Kurdistan." Barzani said "Hooray Brotherhood" in both Turkish and Kurdish during his speech and Şivan Perwer and İbrahim Tatlıses followed his example and sang in both Turkish and Kurdish as well.

The day after the event, which had already been covered extensively by the media during the previous days, nearly every newspaper's headlines described the meeting as a historic day. Emre Uslu, from the Zaman newspaper which has been reporting the story thoroughly, argued that the meeting was interesting on three levels. Firstly, the meeting was an investment for Erdoğan's local elections' campaign. Secondly, it was important to exclude Öcalan from the Kurdish initiative and invite Barzani instead. Finally, the meeting appears to be a piece of Turkey's general effort to develop its relations with Iraqi Kurdistan in order to solve a row over Kurdish energy resources.

Mahmut Hamsici from BBC Turkish viewed this meeting as a sign of foreign policy change and the beginning of a new process. Cengiz Çandar, who has been writing about the Kurdish issue for many years, highlighted that this meeting took place in an era of heated rivalry among the Kurds of the Middle East. In *Aydınlık* newspaper, Ali Güller evaluated that this meeting was just a piece of the regional petrol politics puzzle.

The political parties reacted differently to this meeting. The ruling AKP highlighted the meeting's historical importance. The CHP's vice Chairman Faruk Lolođlu described the event as a message to Kandil and Abdullah Öcalan himself. However, Oktay Vural, vice Chairman of the MHP, argued that Erdoğan dug his own grave by betraying the public and especially his voters .

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The Uncertainty of Turkish Foreign Policy

According to Erdoğan's foreign policy advisor, Ibrahim Kalin, the "zero problems" (with neighbors) policy has turned into a "precious loneliness" one. Although the Turkish government usually claims to follow an ethics-based external policy, a wind of change blows through its agenda and this shift has sparked a public debate over the country's problematic foreign affairs.

It was obvious that the relations between Turkey and Egypt had deteriorated after Morsi's ousting but no one had predicted that Egypt would reach the point to declare the Turkish ambassador "persona non grata." Egypt justified its decision by arguing that the Turkish embassy was supporting terrorist groups on its soil¹. The Turkish government asked the Egyptian ambassador to leave as well and Erdoğan stated that he would never show respect for those who came to power through a coup. In *Radikal*, columnist Cengiz Çandar criticized extensively the Turkish foreign policy and brought up the need for a general reset. According to him the Egyptian action proved that Erdoğan's effort to become the leader of the Middle East is stuck in a dead end. Furthermore, Çandar argues that Erdoğan's plan to use his connections with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist political parties in order to increase Turkey's reputation in the Arab world has failed.

Al Monitor and *Milliyet* columnist Kadri Gürsel emphasized the importance of secularism in foreign policy and castigated the Turkish effort to play the Sunni card which alienates Shi'i Iran. Moreover, Fehim Taştekin (*Radikal*) argues that Turkey finds it difficult to adapt to changing conditions in global affairs. However, Foreign Minister

Ahmet Davutođlu responded to public criticism by pointing out that the state was aware of the changing conditions in the international arena. In November, Davutođlu made a surprising call for armistice concerning Syria during his visits in Iraq and Iran and emphasized that the Turkish government respected both nations' points of view. Meanwhile, Erdoğan announced his intention to join the Shanghai Five in Russia. The Turkish media evaluated this decision as a sign of disengagement by the USA and the West in general.

Moreover, the opposition parties were also concerned about the shifts and problems of the Turkish foreign policy. The leader of Turkey's main opposition party Kemal Kılıçdarođlu, described his vision about Turkey, its foreign policy, and its relations with the USA at the Brookings Institution. The BDP discussed the future of the Middle East and the changing place of the Kurds in the region at a conference entitled "The Kurdish Role in the New Middle East." Finally, the Ulusal Kanal, which is related to the Workers Party, made a partnership agreement with the public television of China.

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The Upcoming Local Elections

Three important electoral processes will be held in Turkey during the next year and a half: Local, presidential and general elections. The local elections' outcome will inevitably influence the following presidential and general elections as well. Hence, the political parties have mainly focused their campaigns on the local elections.

The AKP, which is known for its past successes in local elections, aims to further increase its numbers (38% in 2009). The process of candidate choice is slower than in other parties because Erdoğan recognizes the importance of the candidates' profile for the local elections. AKP's general vice President Menderes Türel emphasized that the local elections are a chance for change and that all candidates shall receive training in Ankara . Moreover, the AKP intends to advertise through the social media for its local election campaign. After the Gezi park protests, the AKP decided to utilize the social media and formed a team of 6000 personnel for its propaganda. The social media team prepares virtual meetings as well as photos, videos and articles for the party's media campaigns .

Another significant party for the local elections' contest, the CHP, aspires to gain victories in major cities. The CHP's leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, announced Mustafa Sarıgül's candidacy for Istanbul's municipality during his visit in the USA. In addition, most of the opposition parties support Mustafa Sarıgül whose campaign takes advantage of the conflict between the AKP and the Gülen movement. The CHP plans to seal an alliance with the left front in Istanbul while nominating right wing candidates in Ankara and other predominantly conservative cities .

The BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) will participate in the local elections with a different strategy. Their main goal will be to win the elections in Kurdish majority cities and abstain from the Western parts of the country. In those areas, the BDP will support the HDP (People's Democratic Party), a group that attracts mainly BDP and leftist supporters . Sırrı Süreyya Önder, who became famous during the Gezi protests, is the most important figure of the HDP.

The MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) announced quickly its candidates and started its campaign in hope that it will increase its last score (16%). İşçi Partisi (the Labor Party) expresses the necessity for an alliance among the CHP, MHP and İP against the AKP. Indeed, Kılıçdaroğlu and İP representatives held a meeting to discuss this idea in August.

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