Putin, Tayyip Erdogan and the Issue of Sunnification: A Duel of Words

In the aftermath of the Turkish downing of a Russian jet, Vladimir Putin and Tayyip Erdogan engaged in a tit-for-tat battle of words about Turkey and its policy aims and goals.

Last week, in an unprecedented move, Turkey-under-President-Erdogan downed a Russian jet and suddenly the whole world was vividly talking about possible consequences and ramifications that could lead to World War III and other such scenarios. Rather understandably, Russian President Putin quickly issued statements condemning the action and accusing Turkey of committing an act of war. In fact, already on the Wednesday-following-the-fatal-Tuesday, Putin did not mince his words, literally saying that "[t]he problem is not the tragedy we witnessed yesterday . . . The problem is much deeper. We observe . . . that the current Turkish leadership over a significant number of years has been pursuing a deliberate policy of supporting the 'Islamization' of their country." And, as if the underline the fact that the Turkish action was nothing but an escalation of the current New Cold War, Vladimir Putin issued these words to the TASS news agency, the Russian state news agency whose pronouncements used to be so prominent during the Soviet and Cold War era. In response, Tayyip Erdogan told the 15th Meeting of Municipal Headmen the following: "[t]hey say that we are in the midst of an effort to Islamize Turkey. Given that 99% of Turkey['s population] is Muslim, how can you make such a statement? Tayyip Erdogan is a Muslim. [As] 99% of Turkey['s population] is Muslim, in the midst of what kind of an effort am I then supposed to be?" The Turkish President, talking about himself in the third person as is his wont, responded to Putin's words in a facile and arguably jocular manner sure to elicit a favourable response from his audience and garner sympathy among the wider Turkish public breathlessly sucking up his every word appearing on Turkish TV. Putin's remark was actually part of a much larger accusatory discourse linking Turkey-under-the-AKP to the Islamic State (or IS/ISIS/ISIL) and its illegitimate oil deals and weapon shipments, a charge Erdogan dismissed in an equally light-hearted manner, saying that "ISIS sells the oil it extracts to Assad. [And t]hat is also where it gets its money from."

The Syrian Theatre as a Laboratory for an Islamist Agenda

Turkey has been at the forefront of the armed effort to unseat Bashar al-Assad from the very beginning. Even though in previous years Erdogan and Assad had been the best of buddies, ever since the supposedly peaceful protests against Damascus came into their own, morphing into Syria's not-so civil war, he has been adamant about the fact that the Allawite-led regime in Damascus should fall and be replaced by a Sunni-friendly administration arguably headed by the Muslim Brotherhood and/or its proxies. As a Sunni Muslim, belonging to the Hanafi madhhab, I would argue that Tayyip Erdogan appears to approach the conflict next door as a kind of test case for his own domestic agenda. Even though many people accuse AKP-led Turkey of fostering ties with ISIS and supporting the caliphal agenda espoused by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Tayyip Erdogan and his henchmen vehemently deny the existence of such links and connections. On the other hand, the existence of channels connecting Turkey's government to other
Islamist factions in Syria are well-documented. For instance, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (known as Mİt locally, and directly attached to the figure of the prime minister by means of laws #644 (1965) and #2,937 (1984) regularly appears to deal with Ahrar al-Sham, even employing the offices of this grouping to negotiate indirectly with the Caliph and his IS (or ISIS/ISIL). Originally led by Hassan Aboud (aka Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), the group Ahrar al-Sham is a coalition of Islamist and Salafist units which became a fierce fighting brigade in Syria's not-so civil war. Over time, Hassan Aboud’s outfit even became the "principal constituent force" of the Syrian Islamic Front (or SIF), set up in December 2012 as a "Salafi umbrella formation, which is arguably the best fighting force within the opposition" to the Assad regime in Damascus, in the words of the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute and founder of the website Jihadology. Borow's words obviously predate the "meteoric ascendance" of ISIS last year, as expressed by Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroğlu.

On 21 January 2013 the Syrian "Salafi umbrella formation" released its charter or statement of intent. The document clarifies straightaway that the Syrian Islamic Front is only concerned with the territories of the sovereign state of Syria, and utterly devoid of any kind of universalist claims or ambitions as recently displayed by the terror group formerly known as ISIS and now asserting to speak for the whole of the community of Islam (the Ummah). The document actually reads like a business plan, with the SIF speaking of its "vision," which is the "[b]uilding [o]f a civilized Islamic society in Syria ruled by the law of God, with which He graced mankind" (the document has been translated by a "[f]ormer-ish student of Arabic, living in the Middle East", employing the pseudonym or kunyah Abu Jamajeem). Summarily, the SIF charter spells out that the immediate goal of the organization is the "[t]opping the regime and establishing security throughout beloved Syria," once again underlining their non-universalist aspirations. In the next instance, the document details that the SIF is "[w]orking to empower religion on the individual, society, and state level", while aiming at the "[p]reservation of society's Islamic identity and the building of a comprehensive Islamic character" to then rebuild "Syria on the sound bases of justice, independence and solidarity in accordance with the principles of Islam." If it weren't for the fact that Abu Yahia al-Hamawi (current leader of Ahrar al-Sham recently elected "by consensus") and his men are now actually waging a bloody war, maiming and killing many individuals in the process and effectively working to destroy the stable state that was the Syrian Arab Republic, the SIF charter's rulings read like rather reasonable sentences that should appeal to any Syrian of Sunni Muslim background. It would stand to reason to assume that Turkey's AKP all but supports a faction espousing such lofty goals. And according to secret documents kept in the German Geheimschutzstelle des Deutschen Bundestages the Turkish authorities have even been supplying weapons to Ahrar al-Sham since mid-November 2014.

A Policy of Sunnification (or or re-Islamification) in Turkey?!?!?

Supervising Turkey’s forays down a post-Kemalist path, the AKP-led government has over the past years implemented policies that favour and even encourage a greater visibility of public displays of Muslim piety and Islamic self-identification among the population at large. Previously, in the Kemalist era of Republican history (1923-50, 1960-2002), Islam functioned as an unspoken but nevertheless potent glue welding together various ethnic groups and sub-groups into a purportedly homogeneous Turkish citizenry. But now that the AKP has been ruling the land for more than a decade, and particularly following Turkey’s recent November Surprise that convincingly returned the AKP to the helm of the state's ship, Tayyip Erdoğan and his henchmen appear to have given up any pretence and continue to cement the country’s relatively recent re-discovery of its Ottoman heritage and Islamic identity. While still Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, ensured that all Turkish citizens could attain the lofty position of martyrs. Traditionally, a martyr in the Islamic tradition is someone dying for the cause of the faith in the pursuit of God's will (jihad). In a Turkish (or Kemalist) context, however, the word “martyr” was used for those who died on active duty, soldiers who paid the ultimate price, in other words. But now, under the aegis of the AKP, as explained by Erdoğan himself: now “[w]e are including civilians who died in terror events into the category of martyrs. Civilians who become invalid of die by reason of a terror event and their relatives will receive compensation and a monthly allowance." In this way, the Turkish state takes on the responsibility to take care of those who have died (or suffered) for the cause of the fatherland, which has now become equal to the cause of God.

The renewed prevalence of headscarfed women on Turkish streets and in the public sector is another reminder of the fact that the AKP has been at pains to defend the rights of the pious in Turkey. The Democratization Package enacted on 30 September 2013 enshrined the official return of the headscarf, that had been a hotly debated topic in Turkey since the military coup of 12 September 1980. And even though the issue seems still far from completely resolved today, headscarfs and other forms of overt Islamic dress have returned to Turkey with a vengeance. On the other hand, limitations on advertisements for alcoholic beverages also seem to attempt to give Turkey an image that is more in line with Islamic expectations and habits. At the end of 2013 then, the AKP-led government took steps
towards ensuring that future generations of Turks would become more pious and overtly Islamic than ever before in the history of the Republic. In December that year, the 19th National Education Council (or Şura) convened in the coastal city of Antalya and during that meeting a momentous 179 "recommendatory decisions" were taken. Elsewhere I have written at length about the Council and its recommendations, which "included the introduction of religious courses into the curriculum of primary schools. Whereas, middle school pupils undergoing training to memorize the Quran (known as hafızlık in Turkish) would be able to leave school for the duration of two years but will still be allowed to sit exams. At the same time religious instruction in high schools will be doubled, while the teaching of the history of Turkey's reforms and the principles of Kemalism in middle and high schools will be subjected to a critical revision more in line with a contemporary understanding and current needs. But the most spectacular 'recommendation' or decision was arguably to turn the instruction of the Ottoman language (Osmanlıca, in Turkish) into a compulsory course for vocational religious high schools as well as social science high schools . . . [which seems} more like a backdoor to learning the Arabic alphabet, which is a prerequisite for reading the Quran." In addition, students at vocational high schools specialising in hotel management and tourism will no longer be taught how to mix alcoholic cocktails. As a result, one could argue that Vladimir Putin did nothing but state the obvious. Arguably using Syria's not-so civil war next door as a kind of template or echo chamber, Turkey-unde-President-Erdoğan is trying hard to obliterate a lenient attitude towards the rules and restrictions imposed by Islam that was so characteristic of Kemalist Turkey (currently even called 'the Old Turkey' by AKP supporters). Instead, the current leadership of the country is heading full throttle in the direction of what they term "the New Turkey," a country where the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk will have been laid to rest.

Will Putin and Erdoğan now stage an impromptu meeting in Paris where they are both attending COP 21 and come to an agreement that safeguards lucrative trade deals while agreeing to disagree on other topics??

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