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WHY IS ISIS TARGETING TURKEY? ²

ISIS has for a long time been releasing videos targeting Turkey. Analyzing these videos and decrypting the messages they hold will certainly help us to understand why ISIS is targeting Turkey as well as coding the AK Party as its enemy.

ISIS has crossed several boundaries in this regard, and pronounced judgements about President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The media committee officially relayed a judgement by Abu Habbab Al Iraqi, an ISIS religious leader, takfiring (pronouncing an unbeliever) the Turkish President. The video entitled “Turkey and the Fire of Racism” explained below contains important messages in understanding ISIS’ threats towards the AK Party. We can learn much from this short video about ISIS ideology and how the group situates Turkey in this context. The 18-minute video can be divided into eight parts.

¹ http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1368/Hilmi+Demir_+PhD.

² This article first appeared on tepav.org.tr in February 2016
http://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1455025672-9.ISID_in_hedefinde_neden_Turkiye_var.pdf

Part 1: Legitimizing the Caliphate

The video begins with a narrative played out on a map of 7th century Arabia. This illustrates how ISIS sees the development of Islamic history. The historical Islamic Caliphate starts with the “hijrah” of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) to Medina, and reaches its zenith under Umar, the last of the four “rightly guided” Caliphs. It is telling here that three of the Caliphs are mentioned, but not Ali, who is revered by the Shia as the rightful successor of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.). With this map, ISIS gives important clues as to the conception of history radical Salafi groups hold.

Mentioning the other states in the history of Islam indicates the ideology of the self-style Caliphate. According to the tradition of the Caliphate ISIS represents, Muslims need to return to the experience that peaked under Uthman. All following periods of history represent the corruption of Islam. This is typical of the Mahdi conception of history. Contrary to the notion of a progressive history, the Mahdi conception thinks of history as consistently deteriorating. That is why the adherents of this view call for a return to a “golden age,” a pure and authentic moment. The video is about this call.

The first three minutes of the video are about how the Turks first became Muslim. While this is being told, the state the first Muslims encountered in present-day Iran is mentioned not by its historical name of “the Sasanian Empire,” but by the term “Farsi.” The video therefore projects backward some of today’s political sentiments in implying that the Persians somehow impaired the Islamization of the Turks. But the Turks are said to have overcome that hurdle, Islamized by their own free will, and served Islam through the many leaders and scholars they have put forward.

Part 2: the Demonization of Turanism and Turkish Nationalism

The second part of the video seeks to blame Turkish nationalism – or Turanism – for the splits in the Islamic world and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This thesis often advanced by political Islamist ideologies. As seen in the video, ISIS reduces the modern notions of “nationalism” to that of “tribalism,” using the latter in place of the former. This very narrow reading of the Quran and Sunnah (the example of the Prophet) often establishes a connection between nationalism and the Prophet Muhammad’s (s.a.s.) ban on tribalism.

The connection it sees between Turkish nationalism and Jahiliyyah (condition of the Arabs before the Prophet) serves to demonize nationalism through technical religious rhetoric. The video indicates that the nationalistic symbol of the grey wolf became prominent in the early years of the Republic, and associates it with idol worship. This part seems to imply that the symbols and ceremonies not present in Islam, and thus idolatrous, are maintained by Turkey’s military.

Part 3: the AK Party Period

In this part, we see the AK Party's founding leader and current president Tayyip Erdoğan shake hands with US President Obama, the Pope, Iran's former president Ahmadinejad, and Russian President Putin. This is evaluated as cooperating with "the people of Kufr (unbelief) and riddah (apostasy)." The words for these sorts of accusations are usually chosen very carefully. Here, shaking hands with Western leaders and the Pope is probably the "kufr" part, whereas shaking hands with Iranian leaders is likely the "riddet" bit, since it connotes actively leaving the religion. The AK Party here becomes the primary target of the video, and all other messages appear to be aiming at strengthening the argument against it.

Part 4: Mysticism and Seeing Shrines as Idols

ISIS adds to the well-known Islamist argument an Ottoman and Republican interpretation. The idea that the "Ummah" has been receding for centuries because it has distanced itself from the Quran and Sunnah, the two sources of Islam, here becomes the natural conclusion of the Mahdi conception of history. The video doesn't explicitly say which centuries it refers to as the recession of Islam, but it clearly points to the Seljuk and Ottoman dynasties. The most visible signs of this, according to the video, are the Turkish shrines and cemeteries, which symbolize the spread of bid'ah (heresy) and shirk (idolatry).

The video mentions that practices such as tombs, shrines and mystic dhikr sessions, which it sees as diverging from the path of Quran and Sunnah, increased towards the end of the Ottoman Empire. We know however, that these have existed in Islam since the tenth century. Territories under Turkish rule always hosted mystic movements such as those of Hoca Ahmed Yesevi, Ibn Arabi, Mevlana, and Hacı Bektash Veli. These movements, with their inclusive language and structure, easily found a place, since the Seljuks and Ottomans prioritized the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition. Despite these facts, why does the video claim that these practices appeared in late Ottoman era? Probably because disparaging all of the Turkish Islamic era as a time of decline would be a tactical mistake. Additionally, the video wants to connect these practices to nationalist movements, so it limits itself to recent centuries.

The Wahhabis – to whom ISIS's ideological roots can be traced – also made stringent claims about these practices in 19th century. Afterwards, Salafi rhetoric that these practices should all be eliminated has been heard repeatedly. There is thus a parallel between the ISIS video's claims and Wahhabi/Salafi arguments. ISIS makes similar claims to Muhammed b. Abdulwahhab (1703-1792), who criticized the Ottomans for the first time along these lines. With his fiery sermons, Abdulwahhab managed to gather tribes around him, rebelled against the Ottomans and paved the way for the establishment of today's Saudi Arabia. A second look at the video reveals that ISIS aims to imply a bad Ottoman image and open up cracks in the minds of religious people. In ISIS's understanding however, none of the actions of the Ottoman can be seen as being Islamic, including the conquest of Istanbul. That is why their Turkish-language

magazine was called “Konstantiniyye,” with the expressed aim of one day “conquering the city in the name of Islam.” A grave insult to any mainstream Turkish Islamist today.

Part 5: Demonization of the Modern Education System

In this part, reforms relating to Turkey’s modern education system are demonized with definitions such as deterioration, backsliding, and Jahiliyyah. The video specifically points to the late Ottoman reforms towards Westernization as deviation. In these reformations, military schools, coeducation, and Western teachers are especially highlighted. When we consider the part that Sultan Abdulhamid II played in modernization, we can say that contrary to the Turkish political Islamist, ISIS sees the Sultan’s acts as a reason for the collapse of the (presumably already corrupt) Islamic state.

Another reason for the collapse of the Islamic state in the video is Ottoman nationalism it sees as being brought from the West. The claim that Turkey’s founding leader is idolized is codified as the main reason of this deterioration. The newly established state’s commitment to Atatürk’s principles is seen as the reason for the continuation of this deterioration.

Part 6: Arab and Kurdish Nationalisms

Apart from Turkish nationalism, the video also mentions other nationalist movements in the region. In this part, pictures of Jamal Abdul Nasser, Muammar Qaddafi, and Yasser Arafat appear on the screen. It mentions that the reason these leaders’ were defeated against Israel is nationalism.

Following this scene, the video continues in Kurdish. Presumably targeting Kurdish audiences in Turkey, it portrays Massoud Barzani and Kurdish movement as being racists. It calls the Kurds to leave their “racist and profane manners” and to embrace the Quran and Sunnah. It also tells them to join ISIS and not to ruin the unity. Thus, the video not only targets Turks, but also conservative Kurds.

Part 7: Hostility towards the AK Party

As stated above, the main goal of the video is to create tension between the AK Party and its conservative base by pushing practices such democracy and secularism out of the area of Islam. It believes the AK Party to be vulnerable to this because it legitimizes the coexistence of secularism and Islam. The video states this claim through a militant that says “the secular Justice and Development Party hides behind the garb of Islam and claims to carry its responsibility. But this is not the path ordered by God, and not the one Muslims follow.”

Afterwards, the video argues that secularism is being imposed by Atatürk's order onto the Turkish public through a party that continuously cites Islam. The video tells this story through pictures of Atatürk and Erdoğan on the screen.

The video blames AK Party founders for helping the West within the NATO framework and cooperation with "Safavids" in Iraq, and calls them murted (apostates) and "the crusaders' hand of cruelty." It indicates its true target and intention by showing the AK Party again and again. The narrator states that ISIS considers the AK Party a greater threat than nationalism, secularism, and the West, because the party legitimates secularism "under guise of Islam." ISIS believes that the people on the far-right it would need to radicalize are similar to the people who are currently loyal to the AK Party. Breaking off this bit is possible, it seems to think, by emphasizing the AK Party's adherence to democracy, secularism, and cooperation with the West. If the West is the "far enemy" of ISIS, the AK Party is its "close enemy."

Part 8: Islamic State and the Hejira (Emigration)

In the last part of the video, ISIS goes back to the analogy between the Islamic State that was established with the emigration to Medina and its own so-called Caliphate. There is a connection between the above-mentioned Mahdiist concept of history and ISIS's call for "hijra," or emigration to its territories. Since the establishment of the first Islamic State started with the Hijra, ISIS calls upon its sympathizers to emulate history emigrate to its territories today. By drawing these parallels, it seeks to spike an appetite for individuals to be involved in a second golden age of Islam. Deterioration and decline will come to an end with the establishment of the Caliph State, it says.

The Mahdiist conception of history sees a constant deterioration of life conditions, eventually being uplifted again into a golden age. In this sense, ISIS conceives it to be on the path of a kind of utopia. According to the organization, it is mandatory for Muslims to immigrate to its territories; where they can live in perfect tranquility. Through high resolution images of laughing children, shopping malls and picnics, Muslims are called to immigrate to the Islamic State or if not able, serve for it from wherever they are.

Conclusion

What sort of a message does the video contain for Turkey? Bringing the pieces together, we see that ISIS is deeply disturbed by the a secular, democratic Turkey as well as the AK Party's continuation of Turkey's alliance to the West. Contrary to the common international perception, the video harshly criticizes the AK Party Government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, along with the system of government in Turkey. ISIS claims that though under an Islamic guise, the AK Party is committed to the Western oriented and secular laws, as established by Mustafa

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Kemal Atatürk. ISIS puts its political message for its sympathizers in Turkey clearly in its video: “don’t live in polytheist community, immigrate to the Islamic State!”