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The Battle over Lifestyle and the Heritage of Atatürk

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The discourse on social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey in recent weeks has primarily focused on two sets of issues: on the one hand, personal freedom and the secular character of life, and on the other, the continued preservation of Atatürk's. President Erdogan has repeatedly declared that his government, despite its Islamic identification, will refrain from interfering in the private sphere of citizens. These statements do little to curb widespread public criticism of the Erdogan government, which claims that he and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) seeks to erode the country's secular principles. Recent actions by the government, such as restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages last June and the increasing calls from government officials to encourage reproduction and prevent abortions, have alarmed many Turkish citizens. Opposition to these measures is widespread on SNS, and came to a head after Hüseyin Çelik, spokesman for the AKP sharply criticized the apparel of Turkish channel ATV presenter Gözde Kansu (pictured), calling it 'revealing'. Shortly after Çelik's censorious remarks, the channel's management, headed by Erdoğan's son in law, Berat Albayrak, announced that the channel was terminating the presenter's contract.¹ Kansu's story created a storm on SNS, and motivated women's rights organizations to organize protests,



with the assistance of Kansu herself, under the slogan “My body, my cleavage, my performance” (on the sign Kansu is holding).

Erdoğan responded to the criticism by redirecting public discussion from cleavage to the long-standing ban on wearing a head covering in public places, a law passed during Atatürk’s secularist reforms. Beginning in early November, five female representatives from the AKP appeared in Parliament with their heads covered. Prime Minister Erdogan stated that it is “secularism that is oppressive,” and blatantly penetrates private space, because ‘secularist principles’ violate a women’s right to choose a modest appearance. Social network service users did not remain indifferent and the issue of head coverings was used as a catalyst for a broad debate between supporters of AKP and its opponents on issues of religion and state, and the question of the government interference in the private sphere.²

Like the previous significant protest against the Erdoğan government, only a bit of this lively debate reached institutionalized public space. One contributing factor was the silence of the opposition parties who did not place the issue on the public agenda, apparently fearing that debate over the head covering issue dampen their prospects in the upcoming election. Emboldened by the lack of opposition, Erdoğan took action, targeting unmarried male and female students sharing a residence. Turkey does not have statutes forbidding cohabitation; nonetheless; police raided the homes of students and investigated the students and their relatives. Faced with severe protest on SNS,³ Erdoğan defended his position by explaining that Turkey is a conservative country and all he wants is to protect the good name of its female citizens. This position earned him sympathy from the conservative faction among his supporters,⁴ but liberals within the AKP expressed disappointment with the move.⁵ As of this writing it appears that Erdoğan’s increasing involvement in the private sphere appears far from inspiring real resistance on the street, certainly not on the scale of events in Gezi Park last June.



Despite this, the public is expressing its criticism in other ways. At events marking the anniversary of Atatürk’s death, beginning on November 10, throngs of people crowded around his grave. The number was so great that the police had to order that the site’s opening hours be extended. Parallel phenomena were also plentiful on SNS, where users held online memorial services praising the Kemalist heritage, and sharing pictures from the memorial ceremonies held throughout the country.⁶ This wave of memorializing did not remain unanswered, and with the same degree of vigor anti-Kemalist users compared Atatürk to the despots of North Korea. A witty anti-Kemalist ad, appearing initially in the magazine *Sancaktar*, spread rapidly on social networks. The ad plays on a well-known Kemalist slogan about Atatürk: turning the Kemalist slogan, “If he did not exist, we would

have ceased to exist,” into “If he hadn’t been, even then we could exist.” Another campaign by anti-Kemalist users calls for discontinuing the siren sounded every year on the anniversary of Atatürk’s death, using the slogan, “We don’t want sirens, we want to sleep!”⁷ This time it was the turn of anti-Kemalists to demand that the establishment not penetrate their personal space.

The Internet debates of principle about the character of the Turkish state and society are not overflowing onto the streets, as happened with Gezi Park protests. They are not even finding proper expression in the mainstream media, but not because the discourse is negligible—tens of thousands of users are participating, and the conversations concern the core issues of the modern Turkish identity. The reason, as we discussed in the previous issue, is that arrests, dismissal and other sanctions are being used to silence critical journalists in Turkish media and TV. Therefore, the media has become increasingly loyal in recent years. Not only does it not fulfill its role as the “watchdog of democracy,” it does not even provide the simpler service of mirroring the fundamental debates occurring in the public arena.

The Shared Memory of the Kurdish Civil War: Barzani versus Öcalan

Ceng Sağnıç

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the process of national revival and *de facto* statehood in the four parts Greater Kurdistan – in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria – has become a *fait accompli*. These four centers operate in an interconnected fashion, posing a significant challenge to the nation-states in which they are located. Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi, recently said that the twenty-first century will be the century of the Kurds. However, old intra-Kurdish disputes and rivalries continue, and are exposed in their full force on social networking services (SNS). A telling example is the debate waged over the fate of the Kurdish region in Syria.

On November 12, representatives of a self-proclaimed Syrian Kurdish Assembly, Kurdish militias operating in Syria, gathered in the city of Qamishli, Syria. Inspired by the Kurdish-Turkish Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), the Assembly unilaterally declared an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria.⁸ The region is not geographically contiguous, encompassing?⁹ In response, the President of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, Massoud Barzani, quickly announced that the KRG does not recognize Kurdish autonomy in Syria. He stressed that the decision to declare independence was made despite unsettled internal political disagreements, and suggested that the PKK was involved in the move.

Barzani’s opposition to the Syrian Kurds’ declaration of autonomy must be understood against the background of the undeclared competition between the KRG and PKK for

influence in this region. The two sides accuse each other of undermining Kurdish national interests. Barzani accuses the PKK of cooperating with the Syrian regime and the suppression of local Kurdish parties affiliated with the KRG. On the other hand, PKK representatives argue that the KRG cooperates with the Turkish government in seeking to suppress any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, leaving the region exposed to the activities of groups associated with al-Qaeda. In any case, official recognition of the autonomy of the Kurdish region in Syria was expected to be made within the framework of the Kurdish National Congress, the umbrella organization of all Kurdish movements, which was scheduled to convene in November after several postponements. Barzani's harsh response led to an indefinite postponement of the Congress.

The fate of the Kurds in Syria, and the intra-Kurdish dispute it aroused, ignited a heated discussion on SNS where Kurds from around the world participate. Users' reactions to the declaration of autonomy were mixed, but interestingly many of them saw fit to point out a direct link between current events and the civil war between the various Kurdish factions in 1994-1997. This war was between the two main factions in Iraq, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP), headed by Massoud Barzani, and the Kurdistan Patriotic Union (PUK), and later spread to Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. While the government of Turkey helped Barzani, the PKK militia fought alongside his rivals. Users affiliated with the PKK stressed the bitter consequences of Barzani's past cooperation with the Turkish government, mentioning that "Barzani's efforts to achieve Turkish support have already cost the lives many Kurdish guerrillas and Peshmerga fighters during the Civil War."¹⁰ On the other hand, other surfers expressed support for Barzani's position and accused the Kurdish Assembly-affiliated militias, which operate in Syria and are identified with the PKK, of repeatedly threatening to rekindle the civil war.¹¹



Users were not content with words alone, and photographs from the civil war were distributed on the Internet. Especially conspicuous has been a picture of Massoud Barzani walking alongside Turkish military officers. For those who are distributing it, this photo is tangible evidence of the lurking danger to Kurds caused by the blood-pact between Barzani and the Turkish government. The message was also strongly reinforced by Barzani's visit to the largest Kurdish city in Turkey, Diyarbakir, on November 17-16, where he met with Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan. After the meeting, a Turkish newspaper quoted Barzani as saying that he condemns all military activities of the PKK.¹² Barzani's supporters responded quickly by circulating pictures of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is currently in prison, alongside Turkish prisoners who are serving sentences for committing crimes against the Kurds.

Despite the significant changes that have occurred in the Kurdish political scene in the last decade, the old rivalries between the KRG and Iraqi-Turkish PKK, which peaked during the civil war, are still a “warm memory” in the political discourse of the Kurds. Thus it is no wonder that the SNS are easily ignited, leading to spirited verbal confrontation. In this case,



discourse on the civil war served to fan the flames on debate around a specific issue that has no direct link to the war, namely the fate of the Kurds in Syria. Translating this into reality on the ground, it could be said that the residual tensions make it difficult for the Kurds either to present a united front or to deal with practical threats from the groups associated with al-Qaeda that are operating throughout Syria and the Kurdish region in particular.

¹ #direngözdekansu; #direndekolte

² #TÜRBAN; #malzemeyapmayın; #dinişiyasetekaristirmek

³ #gıñageldiartık; #ayñievdekızervek; #kızlıervekklıyasaklar; #kızlıervekklıayñievdekalıyoruz

⁴ #kızınoluncaanlarsın

⁵ Nazlı Ilıcak, “AKP’ye oy verdim ama artık utaniyorum,” (I voted for AKP but now I am embarrassed of it), *CNN TÜRK*, November 6, 2013, <http://video.cnnturk.com/2013/haber/11/6/nazli-ilicak-akpye-oy-verdim-ama-artik-utaniyorum> [Accessed on: November 21, 2013]

⁶ Fikirler Ölmez; #ÇünküAtatürk; #Atatürkgençliğitakipleşiyor; #10Kasım; #Sananetayyip; #10Kasımulönderianıyoruz

⁷ SirenlerÇalmasın uyuyacağız

⁸ *Rojavada Geçici Özerklik İlan Edildi*, Nuçe Haber, 12 November 2013, <http://www.nucehaber.com/haber/syaset/rojavada-gecici-ozerklik-ilan-edildi/5649.html>

⁹ Kurdish region in Syria includes three different areas: Afrin in the west, Ain al-Arab and the Qamishli District.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/welatopinion/status/402967105936429057>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/MehmetUnludere/status/363951064749719552>

¹² http://www.posta.com.tr/siyaset/HaberDetay/Barzani_Artik_kan_dokulmemeli.htm?ArticleID=95179