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ISIL attacks trigger secular reaction in Turkey

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On the afternoon of Jan. 1 a group of young men and women staged a brief public demonstration in a teahouse in Okmeydanı, a working-class neighborhood of Istanbul, declaring that they would struggle to keep Turkey's secular system alive and not let the propagandists of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or similar jihadist organizations recruit people in their area.

The initiative came after the Reina nightclub attack by a gunman who killed 39 and wounded 65 people in the early hours of the year. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by ISIL on Jan. 2.

In a video broadcast by the Twitter account of the Halkevleri (People's Houses) a young member Ergin Çevik is seen delivering a speech. "There is a flag that needs to be raised against [religious] reactionaryism," Çevik said to locals playing card games in the teahouse. "The name of that flag is the flag of secularism. Secularism means freedom, brotherhood and struggling for a humane life. We are calling on everyone to be soldiers of this struggle. We are calling on you to bring fascists and lovers of the presidential system to account. Thank you for listening to us."

After the video went viral, one Twitter user said the Halkevleri protesters were "inviting people to a civil war" and appealed to the Interior Ministry to "stop those traitors."

The ministry, which had just declared a manhunt to catch the on-the-run ISIL terrorist, acted quickly on that warning. Through its official Twitter account, it said anti-terror teams had been assigned to probe the issue and the group in the video should be identified wherever they are seen.

The ministry's reaction to this peaceful call for secularism, one of the basic principles of the Turkish constitution, triggered widespread condemnation in social media, with the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) slamming the ministry and launching a hashtag reading "Secularism is not a crime." The ministry then deleted its tweet about identifying and arresting the young people who had simply called for jihadists to be stopped and for the secular system to be defended.

However, on Jan. 2 a member of the group, a young woman named Ayşegül Başar, who was standing alongside Çevik in the video, was detained by police at her home in the early hours of Jan. 2. CHP deputy Barış Yarkadaş criticized the move and asked why the Interior Ministry is "bothered by youths making anti-ISIL propaganda?"

Later on the morning of Jan. 2, members of another civilian initiative, the Turkey Democracy Platform (TDP), lay red carnations in front of the Reina club building and its spokeswoman, lawyer Kezban Hatemi, said the terrorist's act had "nothing to do with Islam." She also said the basics of the system in Turkey - a democratic, secular, state of law - should be maintained, particularly for the sake of people having the freedom to live the lifestyle they choose.

The TDP is notable as it has taken an active role abroad in explaining the reality of last year's failed July 15 military coup attempt. It has also raised issues like arrested journalists and the need to stay within the law while fighting terrorism, while also protesting terrorist attacks by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), ISIL, and others.

In another move on Jan. 2, the CHP asked the prosecutors' office to open a court case against Mehmet Görmez, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), after he issued a sermon that was read in 84,000 mosques across Turkey during Friday prayers on Dec. 30, two days before the attack. The sermon slammed New Year celebrations as illegitimate and said they had no place in Islam.

A radical version of secularism - distorted and imposed mainly by the military, judicial and academic establishment in the 1980s and 90s - was among the causes that triggered a reaction among pious people in Turkey, becoming one of the factors that helped first bring the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) to power in 2002. Later, in controversial court cases opened from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, that radical version of secularism was presented as the source of almost all evil in Turkey.

Then came the military coup attempt of July 15, allegedly masterminded by the secret network in the army, police and judiciary of Fethullah Gülen, an Islamist preacher living in the U.S.

Now, after the Syria civil war-infected acts of terrorism by ISIL, it is interesting to see a

grassroots social wave gathering speed among people keen to defend their secular lifestyles and protect Turkey's democratic nature.