

Implications of Turkey's Anti-Hizbullah Operation

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Brief Analysis

The recent crackdown on "Turkish Hizbullah" has led to turmoil among Turkey's Islamists. Rather than provoking widespread fears of increased terrorism, the unveiling of a Hizbullah threat has created a context for another confrontation between the Turkish army and Turkey's legal pro-Islamist party, Fazilet. This clash has cast a political shadow on an upcoming court ruling on the Fazilet Party's (FP's) legitimacy, with possible implications for Turkey's European Union (EU) membership bid.

What is Turkish Hizbullah? An on-going police operation over the last two weeks has resulted in the capture of several high-level members of the Turkish Hizbullah, and the death of their leader, Huseyin Velioglu. Although the operation appeared to occur out of the blue, major anti-Hizbullah operations actually date back to 1998, when seventy-nine members were arrested. Turkish Hizbullah reportedly aimed to create an independent Kurdish Islamist state in the southeast of Turkey, using mosques as sites for organization and recruitment, while maintaining safehouses throughout the country for the purposes of interrogation, executions, and burying of victims. In these houses, the bodies of victims who were buried alive after being gruesomely tortured have been found. To date, more than sixty of these bodies have been recovered, with hundreds more expected.

More than a thousand militants have so far been arrested, with the number likely to increase as police operations continue in southeast Turkey. Huseyin Velioglu's involvement with political Islamist movements reportedly dates back to his membership in the National Union of Turkish Students (MTTB), a group affiliated in the 1970s with Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party, which has since that time, under different names (most recently the FP), represented political Islam in Turkey. Turks are shocked by reports that Hizbullah has cells in most regions of the country; Velioglu's funeral drew over a thousand people. Still, there is no sense of impending chaos, or "Algerianization," among most Turks. The highly professional operation of the Turkish authorities has inspired public confidence that they have the situation under control.

Iranian Connection. Experts believe Turkish Hizbullah emerged around 1979 as the Iranian Revolution began supporting active terror methods for Islamist revolutions. Hundreds of the revolution's Turkish sympathizers reportedly spent time in Iran and Afghanistan in the 1980s. A 1995 Turkish parliamentary report revealed that 400–500 Turkish teenagers had been sent by Hizbullah to training camps in Iran for ideological and military training. Recently arrested Hizbullah terrorists have given further support to this claim by testifying in court that they received military training in Iran and have even provided names and descriptions of individual Iranian Revolutionary Guards. In an interview last week, the former chief of Turkish Police Intelligence stated that Iran brought Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and Hizbullah representatives together to negotiate a ceasefire in 1988, adding that it was only after this meeting in Iran that Turkish officials took a more decisive position against Hizbullah. It was also reported that Hizbullah leader Velioglu had returned from Iran only days before he was killed. Not surprisingly, Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi publicly denied any Iranian connection to Hizbullah during his recent visit to Turkey.

State Involvement? Thus far, most information about Hizbullah comes from Turkish security sources. Much about

Hizbullah remains mysterious, even its name. "Hizbullah" was bestowed on the group years ago by Turkish security officials and picked up by the media because of the group's goals and methods. It became a force in the southeast in the early 1990s as it sought to eliminate its pacifist members and attacked apparently non-violent PKK supporters. Because of its anti-PKK origins, there has long been speculation that Turkish state authorities were supporting Hizbullah. These claims range from the authorities having founded and run Turkish Hizbullah, to merely having turned a blind eye to some of its operations. The Hizbullah dragnet has highlighted these charges, forcing state officials to respond. The Turkish army and President Süleyman Demirel completely reject the idea of any state involvement, but other state officials have conceded that security elements may have tolerated its activities. Turkey's National Security Council (NSC) last week sought to stanch discussion of the issue by insisting that until the facts about Hizbullah are fully revealed, allegations concerning state involvement should cease; otherwise, the NSC said, such charges will be considered as attempts to distract attention from the true perpetrators, the fundamentalists. Somewhat surprisingly, the NSC statement did not totally rule out the possibility of uncovering some form of state involvement. For now, the press has fallen into line, and halted speculation about state involvement.

The Military vs. Fazilet. Questions over alleged state involvement deepened hostility between the FP and the army, particularly after Fazilet leader Recai Kutan charged that the army had deliberately ignored Hizbullah's existence for years when it was fighting the PKK. This prompted an immediate response from the army that the FP promotes an outlook that is itself the real source of groups like Hizbullah. The military's statement obliquely suggested that Fazilet should be closed, an issue the courts were already slated to rule on soon. Three previous Turkish pro-Islamist parties have been banned in the past. The confrontation has left Fazilet in apparent disarray. Many party members were shocked by their chairman's initial statement, which they saw as needlessly provocative, and then by his "embarrassing" retreat: that he had been referring to some journalist's opinion, not his own, following the military's criticism. Some even called for Kutan's resignation. Others have stated that the party should stand behind the statement and resist the army's attacks. The incident has deepened a widening fissure between so-called moderates and traditionalists in the party, and talk of a formal split has been rampant.

Division among the Islamists. The confrontational atmosphere both between secularists and Islamists, and among Islamists themselves, has raised questions about the future of the political Islamist movement in Turkey. Secular circles and many ordinary citizens tend to see recent events as a major blow for all forms of Islamism in Turkey, arguing that Hizbullah reveals the true face of all Islamists. Obviously worried, Fazilet and its supporters have tried to defend themselves by claiming that Hizbullah has revealed that there are different types of Islamists and that the pro-Fazilet majority are not a threat to state and society. The Hizbullah episode may hurt the Islamist cause, though. Many Fazilet supporters wish to avoid confrontation with the military, as last year's election suggested. The movement may also feel forced to become more selective in its party membership, leading to a higher level of mistrust, compartmentalization, and divisiveness within the movement. That would eviscerate one of the Islamist movement's advantages: its unifying vagueness of definition and ability to avoid coming to terms with its heterogeneity--particularly concerning beliefs on various methods of struggle, politics, violence, and so on. On the other hand, if secular elements exaggerate their attempt to use Hizbullah to discredit all Islamists, the Islamists could rebound and solidarity among them could rise.

Fazilet's Future. After Fazilet's strong defense in court and the recent legal reforms liberalizing rules about political parties, it seemed that the FP might stand a chance of avoiding closure. But the military's accusation that Fazilet is responsible for radical Islamist fundamentalism may change the equation. Another element contributing to the determination of Fazilet's future is Turkey's bid for EU membership. A European ambassador to Turkey has already warned that Fazilet's fate will be seen as the first "true test of Turkish commitment" to EU principles. The spotlight is on the Constitutional Court, which has been accused in the past of being influenced by the military. A ruling in Fazilet's favor would dent the military's prestige and perhaps undermine its anti-Islamist campaign, but it would

also be seen as a sign of greater liberalization and court independence, perhaps boosting Turkey's EU prospects.

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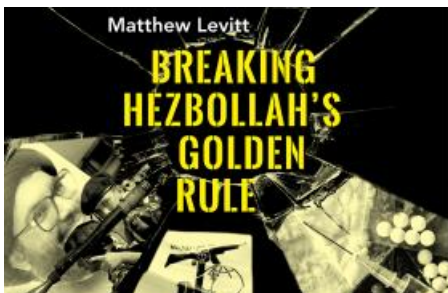
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