

'Homegrown Islam project' could lead to new Ankara-Berlin tensions

Author:

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ANKARA: Germany has reportedly initiated a campaign to push German Muslims to develop a new interpretation of Islam, the Financial Times reported on Monday.

"What we need now is an Islam for German Muslims that belongs to Germany," Markus Kerber, the government representative responsible for relations with the Muslim community under the German Interior Ministry, reportedly told the Financial Times.

The move of Europe's economic powerhouse is expected to influence Turkey's state-led diaspora engagement with German-Turks as well as its state-level relations with Germany. But experts do not anticipate relations to further deteriorate as they say they are already as bad as they can get.

Turks, mostly from the conservative section of society, have been emigrating to Germany since the early 1960s; originally as guest workers during the economic boom. They have since become the largest Muslim community in the country.

Germany's new plan aims to counter foreign influence on the Muslim community and provide homegrown training to all imams preaching in Germany.

The largest Islamic organization in Germany is the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, which is affiliated to Turkey's state directorate for religious affairs. Turkey is sending imams to Germany who are paid by the Turkish government and who are preaching in Turkish in 900 mosques funded by Ankara.

According to Yoruk Halil, a halal butcher living in Frankfurt, Germany's new move will be beneficial for the Turkish Muslim community.

"Those imams coming from Turkey do not benefit Turkish youth in Germany because these young people have been raised with a totally different culture and they mostly speak German, so they cannot establish a healthy dialogue with those imams," Halil told Arab News. "In order to reach out to the Muslim community, including Turks, there is a need to use homegrown imams.

My 15-year-old son has been going to the mosque for five years and he even told me that he has better communication with imams being trained and educated in Germany," he said.

There is also a continuing debate over requiring Muslims in Germany to pay a worship tax.

Turkey is against any "Germanification" of Islam and considers any

redefinition of Islam for Germany against the universality of the religion.

Germany's move intends to further integrate Muslims' daily routines into German society, to boost the loyalty of the 3 million members of the German-Turkish community. It is therefore considered a move for breaking the Turkish community's ties with their national and religious identity as well as their traditions.

Last year, German police recorded some 578 hate crimes against Muslims between January and September, while about half of Germans think that Islam is incompatible with the values of their nation, according to recent research by pollster YouGov.

"Turkey has been developing diaspora politics since the mid-2000s, and Turks in Germany have been put at the center of it," Murat Onsoy, an expert in Turkey-Germany relations at Hacettepe University in Ankara, told Arab News.

However, for Onsoy, the presence of imams in Germany who have been appointed by Turkey is a socialization factor for the Turkish diaspora – who show relatively low rates of crime – and to maintain their links with their home country.

"If Germany rejects Turkish funding to these mosques, they will face serious difficulties in covering their expenses," he said.

Germany has a community of about 4.5 million Muslims worshipping at about 2,400 mosques, and the number is expected to rise with the refugee influx from Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Syria. The German federal constitution, called Basic Law, gives autonomy to Muslim communities to receive funding and religious officials from abroad to operate mosques in Germany.

"It is unlikely that this article of the constitution would be easily amended. Various provinces would react to such a move, resulting in widespread protests. The Turkish government would raise the issue at the intergovernmental Islamic organizations, and the German government would be obliged to take a step back," Onsoy said.

He, however, draws attention to the timing of the debate.

"It coincides with the upcoming local elections in Turkey this Sunday, and in the past we witnessed that such potential crises with Western countries have been used by the ruling government to consolidate its voters through engaging in international polemics and assuming the role of the defender of external Turks and 'Islam' worldwide," he said.

Ayhan Kaya, professor at Istanbul Bilgi University, said that the move in Germany to bring a homegrown reading to Islam had already been on the table since Angela Merkel's initiative in 2006.

"Although it contradicts with the Sunni Islam rhetoric, what Germany did is a counter-move against the lobbying strategies of Muslim countries such as Turkey, Morocco or Algeria within German territories," he told Arab News.

Kaya also noted that in the past Germany and Turkey developed joint projects to train imams who would be appointed in Germany by providing them with linguistic and cultural-integration skills.

“This latest move is a dialectic result of the political maneuvers on the diasporas by countries who are sending and receiving migration,” he said.



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Merkel, Erdogan hold tense talks in shadow of protests
Germany, Turkey hail progress in handling refugee crisis

[In Turkey, small sums go a long way as Syria kids go back to school](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-03-26 22:55

ADANA: Like many students of her age, 16-year-old refugee Fatmeh dreams of becoming a doctor. And a modest monthly sum of less than 10 euros could make all the difference.

Originally from the Syrian city of Aleppo, the teenager has been living in Adana in southern Turkey for six years with her father and three small brothers.

To help feed the family, the father sells Syrian pastries that she helps make at home.

"I missed the first term of school to help my dad look after my three little brothers and prepare the pastries," she told AFP between classes at public school in Adana.

Fatmeh is one of 460,000 refugees in Turkey – most of them Syrian – whose family benefits from monthly supplements aimed at keeping school-age children in class rather than out working.

The money – 35-50 Turkish lira for boys, and 40-60 lira for girls (\$6-\$11/5-9 euros) – is part of the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education program, funded by international sources like the European Union and managed by the UN children's fund UNICEF, the Red Cross and the Turkish authorities.

If the sums seem meager, it can be a boon for poor Syrian families who often live on basic aid and informal work, especially those with several school-age children.

The amount is similar to that given to Turkish families by the social services so as to avoid complaints that Syrian refugees get preferential treatment, says Mathias Eick, a spokesman for the EU's humanitarian operations.

"We've assigned €86 million to the program to date," he told AFP.

Turkey is home to around 3.5 million Syrian refugees, and most of those benefitting from the program are Syrian.

According to UNICEF data, around 600,000 school-age Syrian children are in education in Turkey while another 400,000 are not.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of students who have officially signed up for classes end up skipping school to work and help their families survive.

At Fatmeh's school in Adana, teachers listed absent students and contacted their parents to persuade them to let their children return, with the program as an incentive.

"The teachers in school were able to persuade my father by explaining how the aid could help," she said. "It wasn't hard because he always pushed me to go to school, but it was me who helped out in the house."

Twelve-year-old Moussab, also from Aleppo, found himself back at school three

weeks ago after missing the first term.

“We needed the money so I skipped school to work in a tailor’s workshop. I earned 500 lira a month,” he said.

Reem Zeidane, one of the school’s administrators, said last month they managed to bring back 45 of the 150 children who were absent from classes.

“This payment makes a big difference for the families, especially those who have four or five children,” Zeidane said.

Turkish authorities and UNICEF have also set up a “non-formal” education program, including Turkish courses, for refugee children and adolescents who have not attended school for at least three years.

As part of this program, 13-year-old Ali takes Turkish lessons every morning in a youth center in Adana. In the afternoon, he works in a car workshop for a monthly salary of 400 lira.

Ali’s father, Hamza, is unemployed after two accidents at work, and his mother is ill. With four sisters, three of them in school, he is the main breadwinner.

“If one day our situation improves, I’ll quit work and sign up for school,” he said.



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Syrian children in focus at Sarajevo museum on war and childhood EU gives \$100M to UNICEF for Syrian children

[Unprecedented flooding hits Iran, forces evacuations](#)

Tue, 2019-03-26 22:30

GENEVA/LONDON: Heavy flooding continued in Iran on Tuesday as many provinces geared up for days of waterlogged misery and authorities warned of possible floods in the capital Tehran as well the oil-rich south. President Hassan Rouhani promised compensation for all financial losses and called for the armed forces to help in flooded areas. "I ask the army and the Revolutionary Guards to help with removing the water and with engineering work in which they have significant capabilities and tools," Rouhani was quoted as saying on Tuesday at a meeting of a government crisis group.

Rouhani's hardline rivals have accused the government of doing too little, too late.

In a meeting broadcast on state television, the president said: "When a city goes under water because of a flood and neighbourhoods face this problem, removing the water is a difficult, heavy task."

The head of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, said that officials who mishandled the disaster and caused the death of civilians could face prosecution, Fars news agency reported.

At least 23 people have been confirmed dead, officials said, and more than 200 sustained injuries.

The flood has blocked a highway in eastern Tehran, state media said.

Videos posted on social media showed cars driving in flooded roads in southeast districts of the capital. Reuters could not verify the authenticity of the videos.

Other horrific footage of [#FlashFloods](#) in Iran

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pic.twitter.com/JzhS602LY

– Windy (@windyforecast) [March 26, 2019](#)

Iran is celebrating the Nowrouz new year holidays, a time when many families travel around the country, but police asked people to avoid unnecessary

journeys.

State television said several villages near rivers and dams in different provinces had been evacuated.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced, and thousands put in emergency shelters provided by the government, state media said.

The country's crude oil pipelines have avoided damage from flooding and the transfer of oil is taking place normally, Iranian Oil Pipeline and Telecommunication Co director Abbasali Jafarinasab was quoted as saying by the oil ministry's SHANA news website.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement that it was ready to offer help to Iran, but "challenges caused by unilateral sanctions will affect the UN response and the accountability of UN to deliver the appropriate support".

U.S. President Donald Trump last year abandoned a 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and six world powers, and reimposed sanctions on Tehran.



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Flash floods in southern Iran kill at least 17, injure 74 Tehran claims 'successful test' of new 1,350km cruise missile

Film cameras start to roll again in Damascus studios

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DAMASCUS: On a long-disused film set outside Damascus featuring mud houses, palm trees, alleyways and camels, actors in flowing robes are making a television series that the producers say is part of a gradual revival of their industry.

Like most other sectors of the economy in Syria, the film and television business has been hit hard by a war that has killed half a million people, forced millions from their homes and laid waste to swathes of the country since 2011.

Any films or TV series made by Syrian production houses during the war were rarely bought by the customers in the Gulf and elsewhere that once made up an important part of their market. Actors and directors moved abroad. Studios lay silent.

However, fighting around Damascus ended last year after a series of massive government offensives, reflecting a wider increase in state control around the country, and Syrian studios are starting to work again.

Ziad Al-Rayes, head of the television producers' association in Syria, said it was again possible to film comfortably and effectively.

"Here you can find four seasons. Here you have mountains, desert, valleys and snow," he said. It is cheaper to film in Syria than elsewhere, he added.

The television series being produced outside Damascus is about a Sufi cleric called Muhiy Al-Din bin Arabi, and is set in historic Makkah, the holiest city of Islam located in modern-day Saudi Arabia.

It is being made to air in the United Arab Emirates, the producers said.

Television series are also being made for broadcast in Lebanon and in Syria's two closest allies Russia and Iran, the producers' association said.

The film set was part of a large studio lot that was unused for most of the war and shows signs of disrepair. A nearby set in the same studio is made up like an ancient Roman city.

During the war many famous Syrian actors left the country to work in other Arab states. One well-known actor, 41-year-old Qays Al-Sheikh Najib, is now filming for the first time in Syria for eight years, playing a photographer in a new series called A Safe Distance, which looks at how the Syrian war affected people.

"Syrian actors always tried to keep up their good level and they could maintain their level in the Arab world," he said.



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[Egypt puts 145 people on terrorism list: judicial source](#)

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Tue, 2019-03-26 13:47

CAIRO: An Egyptian court upheld Tuesday a decision to put 145 people, including staunch Muslim Brotherhood supporters, on the country's "terrorism list," a judicial source said.

The Court of Cassation rejected appeals against a ruling passed by a lower court in June last year.

The defendants were accused of training militants and plotting violence in the country, the source said.

The list includes senior Brotherhood figures, many of whom fled Egypt following the military ouster of Islamist president Muhammad Mursi in 2013. The Brotherhood was designated a “terrorist organization” months after Mursi’s overthrow.

Turkey-based TV hosts Moataz Matar and Mohamed Nasser, who both work for pro-Muslim Brotherhood channels, are among those on the list.

Matar has recently been in the crosshairs of the state after initiating online calls for protests against President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Hundreds have been added to Egypt’s terrorism list in recent years including Mursi himself.



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