

Turkey: Protests in Istanbul against Israeli aggression

Islamic organizations seek to dampen opposition to government

Our correspondent
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On August 4, hundreds of Islamic fundamentalists took part in demonstrations at several Istanbul mosques, including the Fatih and Beyazit mosques, which are strongholds of radical Islamic organizations, following Friday prayers. About 500 people took part in each demonstration.

The course and slogans of the various demonstrations were identical, indicating that they were centrally planned. During the rallies protesters waved Palestinian flags, Islamic symbols and pictures of Hezbollah leaders and chanted slogans against Israel and Zionism and in favor of Hamas. “Down with the US and Israel,” “Murderer Israel” and “Collaborator AKP” (referring to the Justice and Development Party [AKP] in the Turkish government) were the main chants at the demonstrations.

Protesters distributed pictures of the many civilian victims who have been killed in the course of the savage bombardment of Lebanon. The demonstrators also proceeded to burn US and Israeli flags. The protesters then prayed for the victims of the Israeli attacks in Lebanon and Palestine, and dispersed peacefully.

As is usually the case, the Turkish police were quite tolerant towards the Islamic demonstrators. The reaction was very different when a number of leftist groups tried to organize a similar rally against the US-Israeli war in Lebanon. On that occasion the police intervened brutally and on Sunday detained more than three dozen people from left organizations who protested against the Israeli attacks and wanted to erect tents in public squares in Istanbul.

The character of the Islamic demonstrations made clear that they were part of a concerted effort being

made to take the heat out of popular protests and provide a cover for Turkey’s moderate Islamic and pro-imperialist AKP, which has refused to come out firmly against the US-Israeli aggression. The Islamic protests on Friday were small and ran late, although Islamic organizations in Turkey have the capacity to mobilize much bigger crowds.

The demonstrations were in fact a good indication of the class character of political Islam in Turkey, where Islamic organizations representing different tendencies have adopted a moderate stance so as not to challenge the government. In the past the main Islamic groups have quickly been able to organize powerful campaigns, including massive demonstrations. On this occasion it is clear that they are working feverishly to ensure there is no effective challenge to the Islamic party in power.

While a layer within the Islamic movement has gradually lost patience with the AKP government’s utterly inadequate and cowardly reaction to Israeli atrocities, a vast majority of leading Islamicists still line up behind the pro-imperialist AKP.

The governing AKP itself is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the Kemalist establishment, which dominates large parts of the state bureaucracy, the military, and much of the media, feels emboldened by the US-backed Israeli attacks on Lebanon. The Turkish military is mainly armed by the US, and Turkey has officially been a military ally of Israel since 1996. Ironically, the military pact was forged under the government of the Islamicist Necmettin Erbakan, who was overthrown in a ‘cold coup’ one year later for developing too close relations to Iran and Syria.

The Turkish media have repeatedly urged the military to carry out an Israeli-style “defensive” operation against the Kurdish nationalist PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) in northern Iraq, which sends its fighters across the border to attack Turkish forces. The US administration and military have, of course, rejected this idea. The predominantly Kurdish northern Iraq and its ruling parties remain one of the main pillars of the US occupation of Iraq.

The PKK has attacked Iranian, but never American forces. It has voiced its political support for the occupation of Iraq and has been keen to avoid conflict with the local Iraqi Kurds. A US “green light” for Turkish cross-border attacks against the PKK is therefore highly unlikely, under conditions where its puppet administrations in Baghdad and the Kurdish north are either too weak or are not interested in launching an offensive against the PKK.

On the other hand, most AKP voters and the Turkish population as a whole are outraged by the US-Israeli war against Palestine and Lebanon.

Most of the dailies carried a Turkish translation of the column written by Abdullah Gul, Turkey’s foreign minister and deputy prime minister, for the *Washington Post*. Gul criticized US inactivity in ending the Middle East conflict, and wrote: “The grave tragedy that has been unfolding before our eyes in Lebanon, and the inability of the international community to bring it to an end after three weeks of suffering, unfortunately raise questions about the US and its proud legacy of leadership for freedom and justice.”

This is truly a “rebellion on one’s knees” from the Turkish foreign minister, whose comments were promptly dismissed by a US State Department spokesperson. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is treading the same tightrope. While he termed the war unjust and illegitimate in an address to the Organization of Islamic Countries, he agreed to the participation of Turkish troops in an “international peacekeeping force” in Lebanon during discussions with British Prime Minister Tony Blair held the day before.



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