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# Re-Educating Turkey

AKP Efforts to Promote Religious Values in Turkish Schools

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# Introduction and summary

Although the issue of education played little role in Turkey's recent parliamentary elections, few areas of Turkish public life generate more heat in public discourse than education. Yet, the most intense controversies regarding educational policies are not about issues such as student achievement or teacher-student ratios. Rather, like so many other controversies in Turkey—particularly over the past two decades—they are focused on the proper role of Islam in Turkish society.

For the ruling Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish acronym AKP, and its de facto leader, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, increasing both the reach of state-sponsored parochial schools and the religious content of curricula in traditional state secular schools is vital to achieving Erdoğan's stated vision of raising a "dindar nesil," or pious generation.<sup>1</sup> This, in turn, serves Erdoğan's larger goal of achieving a new Turkey that is less in tune with the radically secular values of Atatürk's republic and more consonant with the religious values of its Ottoman predecessor state.

Less grandly but just as importantly, the AKP considers the expansion of parochial schools, known as Imam-Hatips, as the righting of a historical wrong: the near-evisceration of those schools following the military's 1997 intervention in domestic politics. The AKP also has a political motive for providing significant religious content in Turkish education: Turks who are committed to Islam, or at least appreciative of its role in Turkish society, are generally more likely to vote for the AKP. To Turkish secularists, these AKP efforts to increase the religious content of education are part of a broader campaign to impose religious values on society with the aims of eroding Turkey's secular structure, loosening its ties with the West, and ultimately threatening secular lifestyles, not to mention securing the AKP's political dominance.

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