

## Extreme measures: invoking moral order in Turkey

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*While our fingers point at cohabitation and house sharing, and our minds are troubled by the imposition of a particular lifestyle, we tend to overlook a larger project of social restructuring.*

What happens when unmarried individuals, in our case, young men and women attending university in Turkey, share apartments thanks to a lack of alternatives, as in affordable, single-occupancy spaces? Nothing of public concern, one could say. It happens all around the world, others would add. Unless, of course, the choices and private affairs of these individuals become a matter of public moral order and begin to be regarded as the cause of Turkey's social ills.

The debate over house sharing and cohabitation in Turkey is about the government's attitude towards reordering social life - that is, it is about conservative values and Islam. However, equally, it is about a larger social reconstruction project that is under way and intended to contain the potential risks that an uncontrolled and unwanted development in a key institution, the family, may bring.

### The paternalist state and the limits of being protected

Housing policy constitutes an important part of policy-making for all governments, but as recent debates confirm, in Turkey, the government is more concerned with "who" lives "with whom" than the housing. Prime Minister Erdoğan has been gradually preparing the ground for the following "guarantee": that the private lives of citizens of Turkey come under the auspices of the Turkish state, and that the government has a responsibility to ensure that this is the case. On 3 November 2013, in his address to his deputies at an annual meeting closed to the public, the Turkish Prime Minister hinted at his ambition to take legal measures against unmarried male and female students sharing houses. He made the following statement [11]:

"Nobody knows what takes places in those houses [where male and female students live together]. All kinds of dubious things may happen [in those houses]. ... Anything can happen. Then, parents cry out, saying, 'Where is the state?' These steps are being taken in order to show that the state is there. As a conservative, democratic government, we need to intervene."

Although the full extent of Erdoğan's surveillance ambitions is yet to be defined, one thing is clear in his follow up on the issue: opposite sexes sharing housing is disapproved of. Not only does such house-sharing grate against the "conservative democrat" [*muhafazakar demokrat*] values of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), but it also contradicts the AKP's strong stance on many other claims with regards to how social life needs to be ordered and governed in line with a conservative vision of public morality.

The following conversation took place between the Prime Minister and a journalist during a press conference en route to Finland. The excerpt [12] reveals the kinds of boundaries that the Prime Minister draws on in conceptualizing social life.

Journalist: Sir, what power do the mayors have in supervising this [*new regulation on house sharing/cohabitation*]...

PM Erdoğan: They'll be given the necessary authority after the new regulation.

Journalist: These are private houses right?

PM Erdoğan: Yes.

Journalist: People's private houses?

PM Erdoğan: Yes... How appropriate is it for a young man and woman to stay in one's private home?

Journalist: It depends on the person.

PM Erdoğan: Would you be fine with/would you tolerate your daughter or son undertaking such an act... When you're a Mum one day, or maybe you already are, I do not know... if you find something like this appropriate for your daughter or son, well then good for you! [hayırlı olsun]

So the Prime Minister has assigned himself the sober task of ensuring that in these "houses", citizens live "in accordance to" conservative (and one could argue, Islamic) values that the government holds dear. But cohabitation in Turkey is not a habitual practice. Nor is it widely accepted. And although the nature of the practice is in flux, only a small minority within Turkish society share housing. So, why all this debate, all of a sudden over the state of the living arrangements in Turkey?

## Is cohabitation the cause of all social ills?

Cohabitation was already a controversial issue. Cohabitation agreements do not exist in Turkey, meaning that there is no judicial or legal protection for couples living together outside of wedlock. However, the absence of cohabitation from the Family Law should not be taken as a mere tardiness in adapting to changing family dynamics in the country (and in the world), as it reflects instead both the government's and public opposition to extra-marital relationships between men and women. Just last year, the Turkish Supreme Court ruled in a dispute over property between a cohabitating couple that cohabitation equals "prostitution", and hence any properties shared by the couple are not legally valid, along with disputes over the dissolution of same properties. The court also emphasized that the couple was in an "immoral" relationship, as they had a child outside of wedlock. The court's stigmatization of cohabitation is also widespread among the population. According to the 2006 Turkish Family Structure Survey, 70% of the respondents stated that they highly disapprove of couples living together outside of wedlock; a view enthusiastically shared especially by less-educated groups and the elderly. Cohabitation in Turkey is, in fact, extremely rare. Comparative OECD rates demonstrate that while on average 7% of the population in OECD countries live in cohabitation arrangements, the same rate is stated to be 0% for Turkey, or a negligible amount (Sweden, 20%, Germany, 6%, the UK, 2%, France, 11%).

Like cohabitation, living alone is also scarce in Turkey. As the Population and Housing Statistics collected by the Turkish Statistics Institute revealed in 2012, less than 10% of the population was living alone, and nearly half of this population was above the age of 65. The other half of the population living alone is constituted by individuals between the ages of 30 and 64, and apparently it is this group that has led to the increase in single occupancy households in the country since the last survey conducted in 2002. The increase in single occupancy rates started to worry the Prime Minister and his government earlier this year. One of the municipalities in Istanbul (the district of Pendik) reverted back some of the plans for 1-bedroom flats, finding them not suitable for families with children. Living alone is not in line with the conservative values of Turkish society, as men and women (might) engage in "inappropriate" behavior in those 1-bedroom flats. Although the municipality hastily sought to explain away their reasons for eliminating 1-bed flats from the plan on the grounds that neighbourhood relations might be damaged in housing complexes or that they wanted to provide housing for as many people as possible—hence a higher number of rooms—it was clear that the ground was being prepared to justify not only housing planning, but also arrangements about who lives with whom in those houses on behalf of Turkish citizens.

The religious ordering of social life plays an important role in many of the AKP's policies, as the Prime Minister makes clear. Yet it would be naïve to read the government's attempts to "protect" its citizens in this manner only through the lens of Islam. What PM Erdoğan means by a "conservative democrat" attitude raises wider and more controversial issues of concern in Turkey, such as the rising costs of pension and health care, high rates of unemployment, high rates of informal labour and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

Reshaping institutions such as the family in line with "conservative democrat" values has direct consequences on who takes on the burden of "protection" against various risks, including but not limited to care for the elderly, child-care, support during long spells of unemployment or illness. To this end, it comes as no surprise that living alone is associated with old age and social isolation in Turkey, as it signals that the person has no family to turn to. In fact, according to a recent study by Buğra and Yakut-Çakar (2012), familial dependency is so engrained in this society that "women without men" face a great risk of poverty. The Prime Minister and his government's stress on three children per woman, as well as their opposition to abortion or caesarean should be understood in this light. Cash-transfers to mothers of disabled children, or early retirement options should also be read accordingly.

To put it briefly, it is assumed that an extended family will take the burden of care from the state's shoulders. House-share, cohabitation and living alone strip the individual from such familial bonds, and increase the care-giving potential burden on the state. Hence, one could conclude that the "protection" that the Prime Minister is fretting over is never really about providing the individual with a safety net. It is much more likely to provide an insurance for the government against individuals who could become a liability for social security, thus threatening the legitimacy of the paternalist role of the

state in our private lives.

## Conclusion

In this brief essay, we examine the recent reframing of debates over house sharing and cohabitation and the way that certain questions are asked in Turkey while others are dismissed. Rather than ask why houses are shared, or what conditions shape such a decision, many people ask how could people of the opposite sex share the same living space to start with? How could they live together without forming a family? How would this be morally—and Islamically—acceptable?

These questions underline how indispensable the classical “family as the building block of society” is, allow the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to locate deviations from the norm, and to reorient the changing habits of everyday life. The spectre of the paternalist state, or what the AKP makes of it, is forced into action with its extreme measures, leaving little space for public dialogue. And while our fingers are wagging at cohabitation and house sharing, and our minds are preoccupied with this imposition of a particular lifestyle, we tend to overlook a larger project of social restructuring that is under way. This essay attempts to bring this larger project back into the picture.



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