

Anti-LGBTQ+ Protest Erupts in Istanbul

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On September 18, 2022, Beyazıt Square in Istanbul was home to a rather unusual protest that was the first of its kind in Turkey. Organized by the Yesevi Alperenler Education and Cultural Foundation, whose self-proclaimed aim is to raise youth that “have the Quran in one hand and a computer in the other,”¹ the “Büyük Aile Yürüyüşü” (“The Grand Family March”) protestors called for an end to “the global imperialistic imposition and propaganda of LGBTQ+ values.”² They also chanted slogans for a global ‘jihad’ movement against supposed global powers that “lobby LGBTQ+ values through their big guns: social media, tv shows, and movies,” according to an article published by *BIA News Agency*.² The official spokesperson for the Yesevi Alperenler Foundation and the Grand Family March is the president of the foundation, Kürşat Mican. He is notorious for his past claims of wanting to commit terror attacks on the Istanbul Pride Parade and for serving time in jail for stoning a synagogue in Istanbul.³

Although organized mainly by non-governmental organizations, the march was heavily supported by the Turkish government. Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), which is a Turkish state agency responsible for regulating radio and television broadcasts, advertised the promotional video for the protest on its website as a public service announcement. RTÜK has also been notoriously strict in its censorship of LGBTQ+ representation in Turkish media, as well

as with its leniency in allowing depictions of violence against women and minority groups.

Following promotions of the march, members of the opposition party CHP (Republican People’s Party) criticized the video and the protest as “hate speech purported by the government, against the law.”⁴ The Social Policy, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation Working Group (SPoD) and the Istanbul Pride Committee made a joint claim to the Istanbul Governorship to ban the protest, motivated by fears that it might cause hate-motivated incidents and public unrest. The claim was denied.⁴ Government involvement in the protest was criticized heavily on Twitter, with Amnesty International’s Turkey branch tweeting that “LGBTI+ hate speech is often instigated by the very government that should be protecting these individuals.”

The Grand Family March and its support from the government comes only three months after the Istanbul Pride parade and protests of June 26 and 27, 2022. These events featured scenes of police brutality and saw a total of 373 confirmed protestors, as well as members of domestic and foreign press, taken into custody. According to a Human Rights Watch report on the incident, this was the greatest number of custodies taken and police brutality recorded in the history of the parade, ever since it was banned 7 years ago for “concerns over safety and protection of public order.”⁵ (This ban came a year after the 2014 parade

recorded an all-time high attendance of more than 100 thousand people.) Similar scenes were witnessed in pride parades all over the country, including in cities and provinces such as İzmir and Datça, which are considered to be majority left-leaning.⁵ Police brutality in response to expressions of LGBTQ+ identities were also a central problem with the Boğaziçi University protests that marked the majority of 2021. The dean of Boğaziçi University, who was accused by students and faculty as being an “ungrounded assignment” by the government, banned the LGBTQ+ affinity club and took students into custody following an LGBTQ+ art show. Many LGBTQ+ students taken into custody during the seven month-long protests reported sexual and verbal abuse by the police, with one protestor telling the *Middle East Eye* that he was often threatened with rape.⁶

The Grand Family March is also significant within the context of the number of LGBTQ+-targeted hate crimes recorded annually in Turkey. In a study conducted by the European branch of the International LGBTI Association, Turkey was ranked second to last in the European Legal Equality Index. The study stated that members of

the LGBTQ+ community “endured countless hate crimes,” without sufficient legal and governmental support.⁷

The Grand Family March directly targeted public figures who had shown outright support for LGBTQ+ rights. For example, famous singer Gülşen carried a LGBTQ+ flag on stage during a concert in April 2022 and made a series of Tweets criticizing the Turkish government’s policies on several human rights issues. He was consequently taken into custody for the crime of inciting hatred and animosity within the public. However, organizers and protesters argued that they were not trying to single out and target LGBTQ+ individuals.

“Let’s make this clear: We are not targeting LGBTI people. We have no space for hate speech. We are gathered here today to say no to this dirty and ugly global plan that is based on an aim to destroy our family values,” proclaimed the main presenter of the event, echoing classic conspiratorial narratives of a “larger global scheme” that have become prevalent in Turkish political life.⁸



Mustafa Merter, a Swiss-Turkish private-practice psychiatrist who focuses on a spiritual/Islamic understanding of human psychology, also spoke out at the march. He claimed that “[LGBTQ+ people] are experiencing a medical problem” and that the field of psychology is making a “huge mistake” with its classification of LGBTQ+ identities as natural and innate. “If an 18-year-old boy comes to me asking to be treated and I wish to treat him, I could be punished in Switzerland,” he announced at the protest.²

The anti-LGBTQ+ protest was also organized to criticize the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.⁸ In March 2021, the Turkish government had announced their departure from the Istanbul Convention, arguing that it posed a threat to traditional family values by normalizing homosexuality. (The council of state attorney general’s office did make an announcement a year later that this action would be unlawful.) However, the only mention of sexual orientation in the convention is in Article 4, which states that the government should denounce violence and discrimination against women of all backgrounds,

regardless of ethnicity or sexual orientation.⁹

The march garnered widespread opposition from the public on social media and the hashtag #NefretYürüyüşüneHayır (“No to the March of Hatred”) started trending on Twitter. Many political and non-political organizations, as well public figures and celebrities, joined in the hashtag to voice their support for LGBTQ+ individuals. In an interview with Voice of America’s (VOA) Turkish bureau, gay activist and SPoD’s lawyer Umut Rojda Yıldırım said that while the growing outright support of homophobia by government officials is frightening, he thinks it is not the popular widespread opinion in Turkish society.

“The minority expressing them seem louder when they have government funds,” Yıldırım told the VOA while expressing his determined stance to continue to fight for equal rights, despite death threats from anti-LGBTQ protesters and threats of office closures by the government.⁷

In a statement made from their Twitter account, SPoD echoed these sentiments of solidarity with LGBTQ+ rights: “The public is no other than us. The public is us! We will not give up our rights nor our lives.”