

Cüneyd Zapsu: An advisor in the spotlight

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Despite frequent criticism targeting Zapsu, which has been by no means confined to those outside the AKP, he has always been protected and favored by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The fates of Zapsu and Erdoğan, drawn together several years ago, do not now seem likely to move apart in the near future.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's advisor Cüneyd Zapsu has been a controversial personality and the man in the news since the foundation of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Ever since then, his relationships with Turkish and non-Turkish players have made him the target of several accusations. Despite this criticism, which has been by no means confined to those outside the AKP, he has always been protected and favored by Erdoğan.

A look at Zapsu's past reveals the following: Zapsu's father is of Kurdish origin and his mother has roots in the Balkans. His grandfather Abdürrahim Zapsu is a leading Kurdish personality, known for his book *The Grand Islamic History*. He was known to have been involved in the Sheikh Said uprising of 1925 and had close ties with Kurdish-Islamic thinker Said Nursi.

Born in 1956, Zapsu graduated from a German high school. He first studied management at Istanbul University and then management and economics in Munich, Germany. Following the death of his father, a cotton-merchant, he became involved in the business and later expanded his interests to hazelnut processing. In the late 1980s, he became the chairman of the Association of Hazelnut Exporters. At the same time as further expansion of his own business, Zapsu became the chairman of the International Nut and Dried Fruit Council, which brings together representatives of hazelnut producers from some 50 countries.

Zapsu first met reputed al-Qaeda financier Yasin al-Qadi in 1992, and in 1995 the two set up a company called BİM in Turkey. Around the same time, Zapsu met Erdoğan and he later introduced him to al-Qadi.

Invitation to AKP:

In the early 2000s, when the AKP was founded, Erdoğan invited Zapsu to join the party. And thus Zapsu's story began to appear on newspaper pages from time to time. Zapsu was in contact with numerous international organizations and he made maximum use of these relationships throughout his term as an advisor to the prime minister and as a member of the Central Executive Board of the AKP. He made a significant accomplishment in introducing Erdoğan to a wide array of business and political circles, ranging from the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TÜSİAD) to Islamic organizations and from the United States to Israel and Germany. The freedom with which he did all this has attracted criticism. He has been described as Erdoğan's right-hand man and the shadow foreign minister. Each time, Erdoğan has openly shown his support for Zapsu by publicly praising him.

Hazelnut speculator'

Zapsu's close ties with the hazelnut trade have also made him for target of criticism. He has been accused of guiding AKP's hazelnut policy, with numerous formal questions presented in Parliament and several accusations leveled. Zapsu and Erdoğan, on the other hand, have dismissed these accusations. Zapsu has been accused of not disregarding the interests of the hazelnut producers. These accusations have been voiced within the AKP as well. Deputy Chairman Nurettin Canikli then said that a persisting postponement in setting a price for hazelnut purchases by the stat had put the producers in difficult circumstances and claimed that speculators were the ones that profited from the situation. He also charged Zapsu as acting as a hazelnut speculator, adding that this would create trouble for Economy Minister Ali Babacan. He even said that Babacan could face trial at the Supreme State Council if the AKP loses its governing position.

The animosity between hazelnut producers and Zapsu has intensified and show little sign of lessening. Erdoğan has stood behind Zapsu and made statements during his visits to the Black Sea regions, where most of the hazelnut crop is produced, that expressed support for Zapsu's hazelnut policy.

Prayer without headscarf:

Zapsu's wife Beyza was also once at the heart of controversy for praying among a group of men and without wearing a headscarf. The group that she joined while performing the prayer was called a high society sect. The leader of the group, Ahmet Küre, a retired dentist, responded to the criticism by saying that the group members were not followers of a sect and that they were all Kemalist and civilized people. The prime minister then told the critics not to meddle in a family affair, again standing behind Zapsu.

Use this man'

In April, Zapsu visited the United States amid public comments that Erdoğan's government's relations with Washington were strained. Critics then grilled him for saying in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank, that the United States should use Erdoğan.

The AKP officials denied the charges but tape records of the speech revealed that he did use the word use referring to Erdoğan. The speech was as follows:

This man is an honest man. And he has his own beliefs and he is true to his beliefs. Please try to... I'd say "exploit" is a bad word, but kullanmak or use. Zapsu uses the Turkish word kullanmak' -- to use -- again and looks at the audience as he tries to find a better word. After a Turkish participant reminds him, he continues with his speech. Take advantage of this man. Because this person has so much credibility, because of his own beliefs in the Muslim world and he believes in the Western style democracy. I think instead of pushing him down, putting him to the drain, use... Here and in Europe you should take advantage of that. This is my offer...

This statement has sparked a fierce debate in Turkey, with the opposition harshly criticizing the government and Erdoğan. The prime minister again backed Zapsu and said that he is satisfied with his explanation of the matter.

Tense days with al-Qadi:

The relationship between Zapsu and Erdoğan is known to be closer than merely that between a prime minister and his advisor. Zapsu is also a central figure as far as Erdoğan's foreign contacts are concerned and has long been accused of having ties with al-Qadi.

In the post Sept. 11-era, as part of its investigation into the sources that finance terrorism, the U.N. Security Council asked Turkey to freeze all the assets possessed by al-Qadi in its territory. Al-Qadi, a wealthy Saudi businessman, is allegedly the financier of certain groups operating in Saudi Arabia. It is also claimed that he is providing money for the Palestinian radical group Hamas and a financier of al-Qaeda. His entry into Turkey was banned last year and his money transactions are tracked world wide.

It is claimed that Zapsu has dealings with al-Qadi, these charges are mentioned in a report prepared by Finance Ministry inspectors. The allegations cited in the report are as follows:

Al-Qadi opened bank accounts in 2000 in Albaraka Türk, a private bank. Money transfers have been made through these accounts and one of the people involved is Cüneyd Zapsu. The report also cites Fatih Saraç. Both Saraç and al-Qadi are among Zapsu's partners in the BİM company, founded in 1995. In May 2005, BİM announced that al-Qadi had sold his shares in the company five and a half years ago. Zapsu also no longer has any shares in the company and he withdrew from its administration in July, 2003.

In a report dated March 31, 2004, the inspectors demanded, on the basis of this information, an investigation. Lack of action on the part of the government sparked accusations against Finance Minister Kemal Unakıtan, who himself was one of the senior executives at Albaraka Türk at that time, that he had covered up the allegations.

Unakitan denial:

Unakitan, responding to questions about the charges in the report, has said the report had been sent to the prosecutors:

Covering up the allegations is out of the question. Such charges are ugly... The Finance Ministry has well-established traditions and arbitrary actions cannot happen here. It has not happened in the past and it will not happen in the future. The report has been finalized and sent to the office of the public prosecutor. This is our duty as the Finance Ministry.

Zapsu said he knew al-Qadi:

In comments over the allegations, Zapsu said he knew al-Qadi, but told the reporters that they were making a mistake by focusing on this issue since it had been already investigated and closed.

There is nothing secret here. Given that I have no legislative immunity and that I am still here, you see that nothing came out of the investigation. Other than that, this is a private matter. Of course I know Yasin al-Qadi. And I hear that I have begun to be associated with al-Qaeda now, while in the past I was PKK, CIA or Mossad, etc. That's good, Zapsu then said.

Following Zapsu's remarks, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has brought the issue to Parliament's agenda. The CHP openly accused Zapsu and presented formal questions addressing the prime minister.

And the ambassadors crisis:

Most recently, Zapsu has been in the news for his diplomatic contacts amid the intensifying Middle East crisis. In one day, Zapsu met with ambassadors of the United States, Britain and Germany as well as the deputy head of mission of the Israeli Embassy.

These visits, which took place earlier this month, have been also criticized with critics calling him the shadow foreign minister. Whether the request came from Zapsu or the ambassadors was also controversial. As the controversy continued, curiosity focused on whether the meetings touched on al-Qadi. Responding to questions from the press, Zapsu said the meetings were routine and discussed a wide range of issues, though the main issue was Turkey-European Union relations.

The opposition has harshly criticized Zapsu's contacts and raised the question of whether Zapsu had these talks as the advisor of the prime minister and, if that was the case, whether the Foreign Ministry had any information on them. This fresh controversy around Zapsu has created unease within the AKP as well.

Erdoğan, who backed Zapsu during the controversy centering around his ties with al-Qadi, initially did not speak much about his advisor's talks with the ambassadors. When asked to comment, he said: I don't know. These may be his personal contacts.

Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Ali Şahin said: There is only one foreign minister and it is Abdullah Gül. There is no other foreign minister, including shadow ones. I cannot know when and with whom Zapsu meets; such issues are not discussed at the Cabinet. These are personal contacts and their outcomes are binding on neither the government nor the state.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Namık Tan said the ministry had information about Zapsu's contacts through press reports and Foreign Minister Gül said: Namık Tan spoke on behalf of us. Don't bother yourself with such things.

Some newspapers and columnists close to the AKP, Zapsu and to the grassroots of the party have suggested that Zapsu should leave after this latest controversy. Erdoğan, holidaying in Ekinlik Island in the Aegean province of Balıkesir at the time, said that Zapsu had been assigned with domestic and international tasks and made it clear that his resignation was out of the question.

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