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## INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

Editor: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

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### **Towards a "Quasi Ottoman-Anatolian-Islamic" Identity: The identity transformation of Turkey's Islamist Movement**

**Dr. Umut Uzer**

As the third decade of the twenty-first century approaches, the competing identities of the late Ottoman Empire and of the early Turkish Republic continue to survive. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the multinational Ottoman Empire was increasingly forced to contend with demands for cultural independence and even outright independence from its subject peoples. Initially, it was the Empire's Christian subjects, such as the Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Armenians, who rose in protest and, on occasion, revolt. Later, non-Turkish Muslims, such as Arabs, Kurds, and Albanians, began to make similar demands. The Ottoman Empire was ostensibly a Muslim state, with "Turkishness" existing only latently within the Empire's overarching political identity. Therefore, demands for secession on the part of Muslims necessarily called into question the very foundation on which the Empire was built.

Of course, the political and social structure of the Ottoman State was complex, and did not merely consist of a binary, Muslim / non-Muslim dichotomy. All throughout the long nineteenth century, a territorial form of national affiliation ("Ottomanism") began to emerge, precipitated by the Tanzimat reforms and the establishment of a more modern bureaucratic and administrative structure.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of nationalism among the Empire's subject

peoples, independence movements mobilized with the objective to establish nation-states in the territories within which they constituted, or intended to constitute, majorities.

The Turks themselves were included in this trend. As the long century came to an end, Turkish national consciousness slowly evolved into Turkish nationalism for certain scholars and literati. This particular idea however, did not gain hegemonic status until the establishment of republican Turkey. The secular pro-Western Turkish nation-state established in 1923 discouraged manifestations of religiosity and Islamic affiliation, even though the modern Turkish nation was implicitly defined as consisting of Muslims, on a sociological basis if nothing else. In other words, the substantive answer to the question “Who is a Turk?”<sup>2</sup> was “Turkish speaking Muslims,” even if such was not explicitly the definition under law. Ironically, in a radically secular state, non-Muslim minorities were kept away from the bureaucratic structure to a larger extent than they had been under the Ottoman Empire, which was essentially an Islamic empire.

Yet despite the existence of a predominantly Muslim populace, as opposed to the Ottoman era, which consisted a higher proportion of Christians and Jews, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s (1881-1938) reforms aimed to create a Westernized ‘New Turk’, for whom religion was to be primarily a relic of the past. Throughout the single party era (1923-1946), the Islamist movement went underground, save for periodic religious uprisings against the Kemalist regime. The most important of these was the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925, which was infused with elements of Kurdish nationalism,<sup>3</sup> and the Menemen incident of 1930, which demonstrated the fact that there existed opposition forces within the conservative Muslim masses to the modernization and nationalization processes of modern republican Turkey.

With the advent of democracy and the changeover of government from the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP) to the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti –

DP) in 1950, DP politicians, including then- Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, increasingly resorted to Islamic-based politics. While the legal secular edifice of the country was preserved, more space was provided for expressions of Islamic and pro-Ottoman sentiments and publications such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's *Büyük Doğu* (The Grand East).

Regardless of all these developments, the emergence of an Islamic political party had to wait until 1970, when Professor Necmettin Erbakan established the “National Order Party”(Milli Nizam Partisi – MNP), which was the first political party of the National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi). Henceforth, Turkey had Islamist parties which remained careful not to openly demand the implementation of *shari'a* (şeriat) due to the legal restrictions to be discussed below. This state of affairs somewhat changed in the 1990s, as the Islamists became overconfident.

### **The National Outlook Era**

The establishment of the political parties of the National Outlook movement was the harbinger of the institutionalization of a Turkish style of Islamist political movement, which was constrained by the legal structure of the country. Due to republican Turkey's bedrock principle of secularism, such political parties were closed in swift succession by the Constitutional Court. After the National Order Party, the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi– MSP) was established, only to be disbanded following the 12 September 1980 *coup d'état*. Subsequently, the movement's cadres founded the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi– RP, 1983-1998) and the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi– FP, 1997-2001).<sup>4</sup>Currently, this stream is represented by the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi– SP), founded in 2001, and to a lesser extent the Justice and Development Party(Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi– AKP).

The main actor throughout the organization and the mobilization of the Islamic movement was Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), an engineer by training. Erbakan rejected the

Westernization of Atatürk and earlier reformers, and instead argued for an Islamic worldview. He considered the West to be essentially Judeo-Christian, and accused Zionism of causing the ills of Islamic society.<sup>5</sup> In fact, he associated Turkish nationalism with Jews<sup>6</sup> and hence presented this ideology as alien and at the service of foreign powers.

Erbakan was instrumental in injecting Islamic slogans into socio-political discourse, and presented a dichotomous worldview consisting of the Islamic world and the West. His party hinted at an ultimate goal of Islamizing Turkish society and state, a flirtation which resulted in the banning of the party under Article 163 of the Turkish Penal Code. This article proscribes the establishment of anti-secular societies making religious propaganda with the aim to change the basic social, economic, political or legal structure of the country.

In sum, during the Erbakan era, Islamists defined the identity of people according to Islam. Since religion was paramount, there was room for the expression of Kurdish and other identities within the larger Islamic umbrella. Furthermore, Turkey was to be the leading country in the Islamic world. Due to legal constraints, references to Islamic symbols and law were generally made cautiously, but from time to time party members got carried away and made radical statements. For instance, Erbakan called for the implementation of “Just Order”, i.e. an Islamic system, through peaceful *or* “bloody means”.<sup>7</sup>

Other political figures who made provocative remarks included Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan, a Member of Parliament from Ankara, who labeled the regime and Kemalism as “belonging to others” and stated that this system would eventually be destroyed. He claimed that the solution to the Kurdish problem, as well as Turkey’s other ills, could only be achieved through the implementation of shari’a. On the other hand, the MP representing the City of Şanlıurfa, İbrahim Halil Çelik, openly called for blood to be spilt, challenging the army to

deal with “6 million Islamists”<sup>8</sup> if it had the power to do so. As a result of these statements the Welfare Party was closed down in 1998 “for being the center of anti-secular activities.”<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, the political ideology of Necmettin Erbakan entailed a distinct dichotomy between the Islamic and non-Muslim worlds. Hence, he advocated the fraternity of the Muslims, both inside and outside the boundaries of Turkey. In other words, the main source of allegiance was to religion; Turkishness did not hold much relevance for his worldview.

### **The transformation of Islamic Politics in the Twenty-First Century**

The rise of the AKP in the early years of the twenty-first century was a revolutionary moment for Turkish politics. Initially, the party learned from the lessons of the past 30 years of Islamic parties as they clashed with the politico-legal structure of the country. Demands for the creation of an Islamic order would result in the closure of four political parties belonging to the National Outlook Movement. Therefore, the AKP toned down its Islamist rhetoric and presented itself as a conservative democrat party analogous to Christian Democratic parties in Europe, especially the CDU in Germany.

Initially, the AKP offered a more neutral identity, especially while it pursued the path of EU membership. To this end, they were even willing to give concessions on Cyprus. The party’s emphasis on democracy and human rights even convinced certain liberal intellectuals to support the party in its quest for EU membership and the dismantlement of the Kemalist state structure, which was perceived to be authoritarian by both conservatives and liberals alike. As the party gained increasing power in 2007 and in 2011, AKP cadres gained corresponding confidence; in time they moved towards a more explicit Islamic and Ottoman identity.<sup>10</sup> It could also be defined as returning to the Islamist movement’s roots, as far as identity is concerned, without the extremist rhetoric about sharia. Throughout this period, there has been experimentation with attempts to resolve the conflict with the Kurdish movement; this

culminated in the so-called “Kurdish opening.” Since the primary identity of AKP leaders was derived from Islam, finding a solution based on religion was considered to be easier for AKP than for parties with a more distinct Turkish identity, such as the CHP and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - MHP).

The government’s opening to the political wing of the PKK failed, primarily due to the latter’s resort to violence and its efforts to create liberated areas in southeastern Turkey. Peace talks collapsed amidst a period of bloody urban warfare that resulted from PKK entrenchment in certain neighborhoods within those cities. Consequently, the AKP and MHP found common ground with their shared hardline approach to terrorism. Following the failed July 2016 coup attempt, the two parties’ alliance coalesced even further.

### **Tactical nationalization in the post-2016 coup period**

An analysis of the speeches of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan makes it evident that, according to his world-view, the identity of the people of Turkey is Muslim.<sup>11</sup> Following 2016, while Islam is still dominant, Turkishness has become increasingly infused into his discourse. Regardless of this, he still seldom pronounces the word Turk when referring to the Turkish people, and prefers to call them “this nation” or “our nation.” In sum, the identity transformation within the Islamist and the reformed conservative movement of AKP is merely superficial and tactical, and does not reflect a genuine embrace of Turkish national identity. The new hybrid identity of Turkey still lacks a name, but could tentatively be termed a ‘quasi-Ottoman-Anatolian-Islamic’ identity.

*Dr. Umut Uzer is an Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Istanbul Technical University. His research focuses on the impact of nationalism, identity and state-building in the Middle East and the Caucasus region. He is the author of An Intellectual History of Turkish nationalism and Identity and Turkish foreign policy. He received his Ph.D degree from the University of Virginia, and was a*

postdoctoral fellow at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies between 2007 to 2010. Dr. Uzer has taught at Smith College, University of Maryland University College, Fashion Institute of Technology (SUNY), University of Utah, and Boğaziçi University. He can be reached at [uuzer\[at\]itu.edu.tr](mailto:uuzer[at]itu.edu.tr)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> İlber Ortaylı, *İmparatorluğun En Uzun Yüzyılı* (The Longest Century of the Empire), (Istanbul: İletişim, 2005.)

<sup>2</sup> Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2005.)

<sup>3</sup> Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), pp. 47, 153.

<sup>4</sup> Umut Uzer, "Turkey's Islamist Movement and the Palestinian Cause: the 1980 Liberation of Jerusalem Demonstration and the 1997 Jerusalem night as case studies," *Israel Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2017): p.22.

<sup>5</sup> For a sympathetic but informative article see Ömer Baykal and Ömer Çaha, "Politik Aktörler olarak Necmettin Erbakan'ın Türk Siyasetindeki Yeri", *Akademik Hassasiyetler* 4, no. 8 (2017): pp.12-13

<sup>6</sup> See [Necmettinerbakan.net](http://Necmettinerbakan.net), 2 September 2014, last accessed 14 March 2019.

<sup>7</sup> "Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan: "Asker kalkmış diyor ki PKK'lı olmanıza müsaade ederiz ama şeriatçı olmanıza asla" diyor," [oncekultur.com](http://oncekultur.com), last accessed 14 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For the closure decision of the Constitutional Court, see [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> Umut Uzer "Glorification of the Past as a Political Tool: Ottoman History in Contemporary Turkish Politics" *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 9, no. 4 (2018): p.340.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.352.