

ISLAMIC RENAISSANCE: LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

Many scholars argue that Islam and democracy are incompatible: Islam's legal and religious strictures, its acceptance of authoritarian rule in the form of caliphs, and its ideological clash with the West seem to relegate Islamic ideals to totalitarian, anarchic, or monarchic backwaters.

The current Islamic Renaissance -- in scientific and literary thought and public policy, in humanitarian movements and a push for liberalism -- is gaining ground throughout the world, from the streets of Tunisia and Egypt to parliament buildings and mosques. Nowhere is this more evident than in Turkey: as its democracy becomes more open to religious freedom and its particular brand of Islam becomes more liberal, governance in Turkey is more accessible and relevant to the majority of its citizens. The relationship Turkey is developing between moderate Islam and democracy seems to be the future of Islamic republics throughout the world.

HANNAH CARRESE
hannah.carrese@yale.edu

GLOBAL SCHOLAR DIPLOMA CAPSTONE SEMINAR
DR. S. CARRESE
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Present me a voice from your old songs
 In this gloomy dawn stage by stage.
 Feed my soul that is agonizing with hunger!
 - M. Fethullah Gülen

1. Atatürk and the Islamic Spring

Paradox has been a constant in Anatolia as far back as the record of human history extends. Abraham is thought to have been born in this diverse region, but its inhabitants have been complicit in the slaughter and persecution of ethnic minorities (especially Kurds). Its architectural jewel and traditional capital, Istanbul, is both the pride of the Byzantine and of the Ottoman empires. Its mosques were once churches, the stones from its churches once pagan temples. It bridges Europe and Asia, unsure of its identity within either region. And so it is fitting, perhaps, that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) -- the father, as his surname suggests, of the Turkish nation -- was born not in Turkey proper, but in Thessaloniki, Greece. At the heart of these paradoxes lies a struggle to define what “Turkish” means -- a difficult task for any nation state, but particularly one with the complex history and geography of the Republic of Turkey. This definition -- what Turkey must mean to its citizens and the world -- is at the crux of an examination of Islamic liberalism and democracy in the country. This is simply because mosque and state, as they can be conveniently categorized, are the basic precepts upon which Turkey has built its definition of itself. The man at the heart of this process is, of course, Turkey’s paradoxical military and political giant: Atatürk.

Atatürk was no proponent of the “old songs” -- that is, Islamic sages -- that the Turkish Sufi guru M. Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941) speaks of (Sevindi). He did however, seek to feed the Turkish “soul...agonizing with hunger” with substantial, principally European bread. The Turkish soul circa 1920 was agonizing over the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as well as their

substantial losses of territory and prestige as a member of the vanquished Central Powers in World War I. Atatürk's remedy was a turning away from the Turkish Islamic traditions that had given the Ottoman Empire such military and political success and emulating, rather, the European powers in everything from clothing and culture to language and legions.¹ On a small scale, the Turkish government under Atatürk's leadership began to institute minor cultural reforms. This approach is encapsulated in the Hat Law of 1925, which abolished use of religious headgear for all citizens "except for the religious officials who are authorized, approved and appointed by the government" (Ministry of Culture).² On a much grander scale, Atatürk completely changed the face of the Turkish language by adapting the Latin alphabet to its spoken form -- that is, instead of writing Turkish in Arabic, Turkish, as of 1928, has been written with Western characters (Ministry of Culture).

Atatürk's modernizing legacy is still incredibly powerful in Turkey: his name is, after all, enshrined in the first paragraph of Turkey's (very long) Constitution as the "founder of the Republic of Turkey, Atatürk, the immortal leader and the unrivaled hero." Many Atatürk biographers, in fact, suggest that Turkey is lucky to have escaped the same fate that led to massive suffering and violence under the personality dictatorships of Hitler and Napoleon, because Atatürk used the same exploitation of the "ordinary people's wish to get respect and to get in on the action" as did these tyrants (Davies). The phenomenon of the immortal, worshipped Atatürk is so powerful perhaps simply because the outcome of authoritarianism in Turkey has been so starkly different from that in other countries: Atatürk, in contrast to other

¹ Turkish Islam -- especially as it relates to Sufi Islam -- is slightly different and more syncretic than, for example, the more radical Wahhabism that defines Saudi Arabia. This distinction is important and will be discussed below.

² This, in effect, meant the disappearance of the fez, the traditional Turkish hat adopted (from Morocco, it's believed) by Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II in 1825. Ironically, the fez was popularized in a series of sweeping reforms meant to modernize the Ottoman Empire, but by exactly 100 years later (when it was abolished), its round shape and tasseled embellishment were seen as signs of the backward Oriental identity that had corroded the Ottoman dynasty.

dominant rulers, “helped his countrymen to get politically involved without turning to genocide, slave-labor camps, and war or subversion abroad” (Davies). The most significant of these reforms came in the Western secularism Atatürk saw as necessary while Turkey attempted to regain power from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. This change completely altered, for most of the twentieth century, the balance between religion and government in Turkey.

International perception has long been that this Kemalism, an “intensely secular civic nationalism,” has been an unmitigated success (Smith). Turkey has modernized and democratized so successfully that *The Economist*, in 2005, labeled the country a “beacon of good sense in a combustible bit of the world” (Smith). Western nations have largely ignored human rights abuses and restricted civil liberties in the face of Turkey’s incredible progress in terms of gender equality and democracy. But the subsuming of religion by the modern state, the idea that “Turkishness” is more important than Islam, has been ever less tenable as Turkey has begun to “advance toward liberal democracy” (Lee, 169). Religion is no longer marginalized or homogenized in public life. Instead, the teachings of important religious scholars like Said Nursî and Fethullah Gülen have brought a set of modernist Islamic groups to the fore. Turkey’s current leadership is ever more focused on the important coalescence of religion and politics: in fact, they seem to believe that Turkey is doomed without a recognition of its Kemalist, Turkish identity along with its traditional Muslim values. Data supports this bold assertion: with its “\$1.1. trillion economy” and “a powerful army,” Turkey, since 2000 has moved far from its customary place (even during Atatürk’s rule) as the ‘sick man of Europe’ (Captagay). Crudely put, “a decade of AKP [Prime Minister Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party] rule has transformed Turkey from a debt-ridden, inflationary economy to one of the fastest-growing in Europe,” a country with an ascending political star in the region (Finkel). Turkey, moving in the

direction of religious and democratic liberty under the AKP, could be a model to other Islamic nations -- and to the broader world. Islamic liberalism and liberal democracy, it proves must be compatible for the survival of either.

2. *Laiklik*: Secularism at Extremes

That Turkey owes one of its fundamental governmental precepts to post-Revolution France must be a point of embarrassment -- perhaps this is why it is seldom mentioned in literature about the relationship between mosque and state in Turkey. Turkey's modern democracy is steeped in the French idea of *laïcité* (in Turkish, *laiklik*): the complete absence of religion in state affairs. Turkey's Constitution attempts to adhere to this principle from at least one direction -- stating "there shall be no interference whatsoever of the sacred religious feelings in State affairs and politics" (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey). In putting into practice Kemalist ideologies, Turkey's government has leapt from this idea of separation to require a forced control of religion in Turkey. The government's Directorate of Religious Affairs, for example, pays all Sunni Muslim imams and provides them with the text of their Friday sermons. This central agency controls 69,000 mosques throughout Turkey and employs around 63,000 chaplains and preachers -- along with around 80,000 men termed "official agents" (usually imams) of Islam in the country (Lee, 197). In fact, this vision of state-controlled religion goes far beyond *laïcité*, being is more in line with the principle of erastianism -- developed in England during the 1600's as a "doctrine that the state is superior to the church in ecclesiastical matters" (Britannica).³ Moreover, by suppressing Islam, Turkey's government "ruptured the ties between politics and culture, and estranged the majority of the population from the state" (Lee, 183). In

³ Interestingly, the man whose name graces this doctrine, Swiss physician and theologian Thomas Erastus, would not have approved of its message -- rather, the idea was developed after his death by British thinker Richard Hooker during the Westminster Assembly of 1643 (Britannica).

the move away from Western influence -- exemplified in Turkey's decision (since 2005) to stop pushing for EU membership -- a new struggle is evident, one that purports to ensure that separation of church and state does not involve state dominating church but rather a symbiotic relationship between the state and the many different faiths that coexist within its borders.

Data on the percentage of Turks who are practicing Muslims varies -- the government holds this number to be around 95% of the population while a recent survey found around 83% of Turks to be self-identified Muslims (Smith). Regardless, Sunni Muslims comprise roughly 75% of the total Muslim population, and thus are the vast majority in the country (Lee, 16 May). Ethnicity has often been used in Turkey to divide -- the platform of the Young Turks (the World War I reformation movement that Atatürk built his program upon) made "the Turkish language and Turkish history the foci of national identity" (Lee, 168). This alienated both Christian groups like Greeks and Armenians and Islamic ones like the Kurds. Religion, though, has remained a core unifying force. In fact, early in their campaign for power, the Young Turks used Islam precisely to rally Kurds and other non-Turkish Muslims against foreigners. Later campaigns to "define and direct" religion, however, have cut off Atatürk's modern, Ankara-based government from the majority of the religious rural poor as well as from sects like the Sufis, Alevis (estimated to be up to 25% of the Muslims in Turkey), and the Kurds (around 10% of Turkey's population) (Lee, 169).⁴ Much of Turkish culture, moreover, has never been as "broadly secular as the Kemalists would have wished" -- even the army, known to be a secularist force, began to support religious schools in the 1980s (Lee, 169). Rather, Turkey's politics have come to be marked by "high religiosity, strong commitment to democracy and liberalism, and marked plurality of religious and political commitments" (Lee, 170).

⁴ Alevis practice a peculiar kind of Islam, best described as a mix between Shia and Sufi Islam. Related to the Alawi religion practiced in Syria (most notably by its president, Bashar al-Assad), it's part of the medieval purist trend that developed from militant Shia and Sufi orders.

Turkey's current government, then, has developed this vastly different idea of the secularism Atatürk so fervently espoused. Prime Minister Erdogan and his Justice and Development (AK) Party have "reopened Turkey's connections to its Ottoman and Muslim past without negating the nationalist tradition constructed by Atatürk" (Lee, 168). This fundamental challenge to Atatürk's vision of *laiklik* in Turkey is perhaps best represented in a speech Prime Minister Erdogan gave to a meeting of the Arab League in Egypt in September, 2011. Crucially, he noted that in a time of transition for the Middle East -- a reference to the Arab Spring movement launched in early 2011 -- "the Egyptians will...see that a 'secular state' does not mean an 'irreligious state'...rather it means respect for all the religions and giving all individuals the freedom to practice religion as they please" (Cole). Although eloquent, Erdogan's vision of secularism draws fire from both sides. Religious organizations like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood have castigated this idea of a "separation of religion and state," especially from a country with a secular constitution like Turkey; and proponents of *laiklik* in Turkey and abroad also fear Erdogan's moderate model (Cole). This unique idea of pluralism, based perhaps more on American principles of freedom of expression as well as separation of church and state, is a weighty and controversial issue -- but it represents the future for fledgling nation-states steeped in the values of Islam but unwilling to continue to struggle under the yoke of monarchy or dictatorship.

Turkey is a concrete example of this reestablishment of an equilibrium -- however controversial -- between mosque and state. Women, for example, are now (at least informally) allowed to wear head scarves while attending Turkish schools and universities -- although, typically, this simple form of religious expression has sparked debate in Turkey for several years. More than half of Turkish women wear headscarves but, per Kemalism, headscarves have long

been banned from classrooms. In 2008, however, the AKP pushed through a hugely popular law allowing women to wear headscarves in any classroom -- university or middle school (Porter). This act was nullified in 2010, when Turkey's highest court (whose decisions are not subject to appeal) labelled it unconstitutional (Porter). However, the Erdogan government has vowed to support any woman who chooses to wear a headscarf at school and, thus far, this informal support seems to have taken precedence (Porter). The clash in this instance (and others) between Turkey's judicial and executive branches, though, raises additional questions about a constitutional crisis in Turkey -- notably because judicial review has become a pillar of liberal democracy. In this vein, Turkey's promised drafting of a new Constitution (under the auspices of the Erdogan government) holds significant promise in terms of religious liberty in the country (Yildirim). While contemporary nationalist strains of thought have emphasized the need to enshrine *laiklik* in the Constitution (rather than weakening the strictures it places on freedom of expression, especially in the face of the growing movement for Kurdish independence), the proposed changes to religious liberties in Turkey's Constitution are vaunted as being enshrined in written principles of basic freedoms and human rights. More tenuous in terms of the electability of the Erdogan government is the suggestion by many scholars that these reforms must then include a debate about the preservation of the so-called "Reform Laws," which stipulate that "no provision of the Constitution shall be construed or interpreted as rendering unconstitutional the laws which aim...to safeguard the secular [laik] character of the Republic" (Yildirim).

Laiklik, though, is not only engrained in Turkish law but also in Turkish character. Therefore, beyond any written reforms, a change in attitude is perhaps necessary throughout Turkey -- both in terms of accepting the fallibility of Atatürk and in welcoming religious

diversity (Yildirim; also Volkan).⁵ Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk reflects eloquently on the mixed heritage of Turkey's half-European, half-Muslim culture in his memoir, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2004). Equal parts personal reflection and analysis of his ancient home city, it melds together different chapters of his life into a contiguous narrative. Pamuk postulates that both Western views of the city and the legacy of the Ottomans are encapsulated in the Turkish word *hüzün*, a state of collective melancholy that pervades the city. The degeneration of the Ottoman state and the steep decline of Istanbul in the 19th century -- especially from a vibrant cultural (and world) center to a poor city jealous of the West -- seems both a psychological and physical trauma for the Turkish state and people, one that effects their every move. Istanbul is a powerful symbol of Turkey's paradoxes, either as a gaudy reminder of the "East," with all of its mysticism and poverty or as a city mired in the doubts and melancholy of its past. In denying this history, and seeking to "portray Ottoman Islam as a symbol of backwardness," Atatürk ignored crucial parts of the Turkish narrative, making it less compatible with the liberal democracy it espouses (Lee, 172).

Metaphorically, Pamuk's reading is even more astute and timely. In *hüzün*, he notes two divergent interpretations: if "*hüzün* begins in life as a word for loss and the spiritual agony and grief attending it...with time, we see the emergence of two very different *hüzün*s, each evoking a distinct philosophical tradition" (Pamuk, 214). In modern Turkey, these traditions seem to be those of severe Islamic fundamentalism or strict secularization. It seems that -- as Erdogan suggests in his speech to the Arab League -- these more radical approaches to either Westernization or Islamization must keep Turkey wallowing in its stagnating if beautiful (according to Pamuk) melancholy. Turkey's purely cultural reforms as well as its attempts to

⁵ These are projected to be presented to the Turkish Grand Assembly by the Constitutional Reconciliation Committee (AUK) by the end of 2012 -- Turkey's current Constitution was written under military in the 1980's and amended in 2001, before Mr. Erdogan took office.

legally challenge the devolution of *laiklik* into erastianism must encourage a liberal approach to state policies, and the relationship between citizens and the state -- and push Turkey closer to the “pluralistic democracy it aims to become.” By throwing off the trappings of its extremes, Turkey can perhaps recapture the grandeur of its past while retaining the heavy but necessary weight of its failures and inadequacies. As Bob Lee suggests in his work *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Turkey’s current government “evokes the past as [it] moves Turkey toward a future” as a regional and world power (Lee, 168).

3. Religious Exemplars

Said Nursî was (and, to his devout followers, is) a holy man in the most profound sense of the word. For much of his life (Nursî died in 1960), he “existed on the edge of legality,” implicitly denying Turkish state secularism through schools, lectures, religious organizations, and his meditation on the divine, the *Risale-e-Nur (Epistle of Light)* (Lee, 16 May).⁶ He fought this struggle simply by crossing “intellectual boundaries,” by launching a “spiritual renaissance” that focused on both a textual and personal interpretation of Islam (Lee, 181 and Lee, 16 May). His tradition was one of a mystical, Sufi movement -- but, born into a Kurdish family, he was sensitive to the harsh political realities of secularism in Turkey. Under incredible duress -- through multiple trials and imprisonments, simply because Kemal’s regime “just couldn’t figure out what to do with him” -- he argued that “genuine secular government would make all citizens free to practice any religion they wished” (Lee, 183). Moreover, he refused to engage in ideological struggle with Kemalism; rather, he reached out to the “other” Turkey -- the “new

⁶ Nursî’s work is hugely influential to this day -- although it is extraordinary that it survived Atatürk’s crackdown on spiritual texts as part of his secular agenda. The government “prevented publication of the *Risale-e-Nur*, but his disciples copied it by hand and distributed it in channels beyond government control” (Lee, 182). It was copied around 600,000 times before the newly-elected Democratic Party allowed it to “reach print in the new alphabet in 1956” (Lee, 182).

class” of the “middling level of...small-town...Turkey” and the “black Turks,” the uneducated rural poor (Lee, 184). Uncomfortable with the “erosion of established customs,” and the positivist idea that “the more modern the society, the less it needed religion,” these non-elites became the Nurcus, the disciples of Nursî (Lee, 183 and 178). Together with their charismatic leader, these “disempowered elements” of Turkish society battled the government effort to “link Islam with superstition and backwardness,” and thus nurtured a deep spiritual revival (Lee, 182).

One of the most prominent of these disciples is M. Fethullah Gülen, a seventy-year-old living in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, in self-imposed exile from his home in Turkey. While neither he nor his teacher, Nursî, have physically been in the Turkish capital, Ankara, to advocate for the startling reforms sweeping Turkey, their ideology and theology are evident everywhere.⁷ Gülen is Turkey’s most influential living religious leader: he and his (by some estimates) eight million followers (called Fetullahcıs) have been instrumental in the transformation of Turkey from the strictly secular and therefore both religiously and politically confused republic envisioned by Atatürk to a “more democratically and religiously tolerant” state (Sevindi). In his appeal to Islamic tradition coupled with capitalism and *hizmet*, his unique idea of a Muslim duty of service to the “common good” of the community and the nation Gülen is truly a man of the Islamic Renaissance (Sevindi). His philosophy, preached throughout his network of so-called “Gülen Schools” that extend throughout central Asia -- as well as some in the United States -- draws not only from the “old songs” (Qur’an) of Islam but also from the work of Nursî as well as texts from the Ottoman era (Sevindi). Like Nursî, Gülen has explicitly stated that he categorically “does not want to be involved in politics,” but his movement has

⁷ Turkey’s capital, Ankara, “a small town in Anatolia of no particular religious or political distinction” is further (if symbolic) evidence of the attempt by Atatürk to remake Turkish identity (Lee, 173). Governing from the traditional capital of the region, Istanbul (thus named under the Ottomans, but originally the capital of the Byzantine Empire as Constantinople) seemed too historically and religiously charged for the secular government (and nation) that Atatürk intended to mold.

offered the AKP “not only an intellectual cadre and a social base within Turkish society, but also the support of the media belonging to the Gülen movement” (“Power Struggle Emerging”). With his significant political clout, Gülen’s idea of the proper relationship between mosque and the state is perhaps the best example of an Islam that -- unlike the form practiced in many other Islamic nations (see Iran or Saudi Arabia) -- recognizes the supremacy of a secular government, but asserts the necessity of religion in molding the moral consciousness of any democratic citizenry.

This power of religion and government, when they coexist, has not yet been tailor-made to fit Turkey, though. An example of this friction, ironically, comes in an examination of the growing rift between Gülen (and his plethora of followers within Turkey) and the Erdogan government. Although Erdogan’s AKP and Gülen’s numerous followers were once unified in their opposition to the dominance of the army, “with hundreds of officers behind bars and the threat of a coup dispelled, the alliance has frayed” and the army remains under the control of the Erdogan government (“Erdogan At Bay”). And while each faction agrees that a less secular Turkey will mean a more successful Turkey, political in-fighting is here likely “about power, with the Gülenists [in Erdogan’s view] wanting too much” (“Erdogan At Bay”). Moreover, Gülen’s supporters are a force to be reckoned with -- they have infiltrated both the judiciary and the police force. Leaks, intrigue, and various reports of Israeli intervention have accompanied this growing distrust between Gülen and his former ally Erdogan.⁸ The crumbling of the symbiotic relationship between these two important players in Turkey’s transition from secular Kemalism to a more open approach to mosque and state suggests that there are still severe problems within Turkey. While “there is a higher probability that the Gülen movement will take

⁸ The most recent rift involves allegations of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) contact with the MIT, Turkey’s intelligence service. When Erdogan moved in to stop prosecution of his MIT director, Gülen supporters cried foul, alleging that this move impugned Turkey’s (stellar) reputation as a legitimate liberal democracy.

a step back,” experts believe that “it is also not realistic to expect them [Gülen’s followers] to abandon the positions they have achieved after years of hard labor without gaining anything” (“Power Struggle Emerging”). This struggle suggests another major trend in Turkish democracy and liberalism: compromise on minor issues is required for genuine progress.

4. Bridging the Bosphorus

Backed by its economic and military prowess, as well as an important alliance with the United States, Turkey is no longer knocking on the door of the European Union as Atatürk might have desired (Captagay). Data backs this trend of movement away from European influence: “in 1999, the European Union accounted for over 56 percent of Turkish trade; in 2011, it was just 41 percent” (Captagay). Moreover, Turkey has gained sway in other countries throughout the Middle East and Africa -- some of which are its former Ottoman territories. For example, although France’s economy is “over twice the size of Turkey’s and France is still dominant in North Africa,” Turkey is gaining ground as an economic and political partner in Muslim nations, although in Arab states this is more difficult (“Dormant Power Revival”). Moreover, Turkey’s foreign policy is anything but demure: Erdogan has dropped “hints at military intervention” against its neighbor Syria if its president Bashar al-Assad “doesn’t stop murdering his own people” (“Dormant Power Revival”). In Africa, Turkey has pressed Egyptian dictator/president Hosni Mubarak to resign and has conducted operations in Libya. It has cultivated key alliances, including allowing NATO to “deploy parts of its missile shield on Turkish soil” (“Dormant Power Revival”). Moreover, Turkey has reversed its former attitude of superiority to Arab nations -- “suddenly, they have come to see themselves as leaders in the region” (Lee, May 16). This turnaround -- this shaking off of the *hüzün* that has gripped Turkey for so long -- can be

traced directly to Prime Minister Erdogan, who has led the AKP to “three consecutive electoral victories,” with more likely to come (Finkel).

Turkey, though, has never been fully accepted into the elite club of wealthy Western democracies: bridging the gap between Europe and Asia, it has been shunned by the European Union for over 40 years since it began “wooing the emerging bloc,” but most notably since 2005, when entry talks began in earnest (Captagay). The controversy over Turkey’s entry into the EU has been largely hampered by two stumbling blocks that Turkey sees as largely symbolic -- to join the Union, member states have stipulated that Turkey must open trade with Cyprus and bring its laws (especially on freedom of speech) more into line with European standards (“Turkey’s EU Entry Talks”). These two issues, coupled with the European dismissal of Turkey’s significant sociopolitical and economic progress has brought about, in some measure, the remarkable reform that has accompanied current Prime Minister Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party’s attempt -- since their election in 2002 -- to reconcile Turkish democracy with its Islam. Paradoxically, once again, it is the West that has exposed problems within Turkey and also with Turkey’s international relations -- and this exposition has led Turkey to turn away from the Western, Kemalist approach to strict secularism to a more pluralistic version of democratic governance.

Turkey’s movement away from Western influence is concerning to many analysts -- most who have, sometime in the past decade, suggested that Turkey ought to become a member of the EU, thus cementing its ties to Europe and, more broadly, traditional Western powers. The AKP’s promotion of a “softer form of secularism that allows for more religious expression in government, politics, and education” has seemingly introduced a new phase in Turkish foreign relations (Captagay). This important transition is one in which, instead of begging the EU for

entry, Turkey asserts itself as a Middle Eastern power, wooing states such as Egypt into its sphere of influence. Even Lee's book, published in 2010, overestimates the Turkish "drive to enter Europe," which he postulates "reflects a desire to further strengthen the nation in economic and political terms rather than a wish to escape the nation-state formula and the bundle of identities it represents" (Lee, 177). It does not seem as if Turkey is turning away from the building of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation state. Rather, it has finally realized that the mostly homogenous, Caucasian European nations that have so ostracized and marginalized its immigrants do not have the same interests as it does.⁹ Instead of turning to Europe, as it has done for the whole of its modern existence, the Republic of Turkey has rediscovered the "cultural riches attached to [its] Ottoman past" -- and, with that, reengineered the delicate balance between its recent past, steeped in secularism and a form of democracy, and its long history of Islam (Lee, 178).

5. Then There Was Israel (And a Host of Other Problems)

Even in lauding Turkey for its process of bringing mosque and state into a better balance, it's important to note problems with Turkey's approach to both liberal democracy and religious liberties. These are, perhaps, not seminal issues -- but are nevertheless problems Turkey must confront if it aims to be a credible voice for a new kind of secular democracy in the Middle East. Foremost among these abuses are the separate problems of Kurdistan, the broader (though related) issue of human rights, and the growing Turkish feud with Israel. The larger and more endemic problem, though, is the fact that Erdogan, "once lauded for sweeping reforms...is

⁹ Germany, the European power geographically closest to Turkey, is famous for its (quite intentional) creation of "parallel societies," through which Turkish immigrants (now a large percentage of the German workforce) are unable to assimilate to German society as a whole. Xenophobic politicians in Germany have notoriously suggested that "the foreigners' return to their native countries must be the rule and not the exception," and that it is "not immoral to demand that what is left of Germany be reserved mainly for the Germans" (Bartsch).

growing even harsher” and more afraid of dissent (“Home Thoughts From Abroad”). One of the drawbacks of Erdogan’s new approach to democracy and religion in Turkey is discrimination and censure of individuals who disagree with the government’s program -- whether these are Kurds, leftist students, or homosexuals.¹⁰ Turkey must address these issues before they are catapulted onto the world stage -- and before irreparable damage is done to unity within the country.

Turkey’s perennial domestic problem has been -- and will be, for the foreseeable future, that of Kurdistan. An ethnic minority, Kurds have been relegated to the status of “psuedo-citizens” since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Yegen). Largely ignored for the early years of Ottoman rule, the Kurds grew to be a strong force in eastern Anatolia -- and were only pushed back to the furthest boundaries of Turkey in vindictive measures following Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29. In a reversal of this marginalization, Turkey’s first Constitution, written in 1921, recognized Turks and Kurds as “unified in their interests and fates” (Yegen). As Atatürk’s Republican People’s Party gained power in the 1920’s, though, the Kurds were no longer necessary as another Muslim group supporting the nation of Turkey: the status of Kurds as an ethnic minority was now much less important than the establishment of Turkish national identity. Ironically, the Islamic liberalist Erdogan has continued Turkey’s crusade against the establishment of a Kurdish homeland -- or, at least, recognition of Kurds as a long-persecuted minority that must be accorded equal political status with the rest of Turkey’s citizens. His General Council, in fact, was the first to coin the term “psuedo-citizens” when referring to Kurdish separatist violence as “treachery committed...in its own homeland” (Yegen). This is ironic, of course, because most Kurds practice Sunni or Alevi Islam (the latter is related to Shia Islam) -- the same brands of the religion that are professed throughout Turkey. A more moderate

¹⁰ See *The Economist* article “Islam and Homosexuality: Straight but Narrow,” published 4 Feb. 2012.

approach to religion and politics in the country must recognize the religious ideals of these ethnic minorities as equally worthy -- or the same. In grappling with Atatürk's legacy, it is important that Prime Minister Erdogan rid his country of the shackles of cultural prejudice that keep it from reconciliation with the Kurds. With a commitment to integration of all religions, its brand of religiously conscious liberal democracy will be much more credible.

Human rights in general -- not just in relation to ethnic minorities like Kurds and Armenians -- are an ongoing problem in Turkey, just as they are in many other Middle Eastern democracies.¹¹ Turkey has repeatedly failed to deal with human rights abuses, citing (when Western pressure is applied) "exceptional circumstances" as warranting these transgressions (Lee, 202). It is estimated, though, that "76 journalists are now behind bars" in Turkey, "more than in China" while around 47 lawyers have also been arrested ("Home Thoughts From Abroad"). More than 3,500 Kurdish activists (mostly members of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party) have also been arrested. An equally pressing problem is the treatment of Turkish students, many of whom are arrested on trumped up charges and expelled from university even before their indictments are read publicly in court. Part of the issue here is that -- as discussed above -- the judiciary is stacked with pro-Gülen (and at least tepidly pro-AKP) judges. Constitutional reform holds promise -- most scholars acknowledge that Turkey's "human rights obligations" make it "vital that the [proposed] new Constitution enshrines full guarantees of freedom of religion or belief for all including agnostics and atheists" (Yildirim). The Erdogan government has been paranoid about its legacy, though, that they act preemptively to stop any protests because the advocates of *laiklik* are so threatening. Once again, a liberal democracy that

¹¹ Turkey's government continues (as it has since Atatürk) to "deny Turkish responsibility for the Armenian massacres of the WWI and even to deny the right of Turks to talk about that problem" (Lee, 202). This is another, although perhaps less pressing, problem that bars Turkey's coming into its own as a fully fledged Middle Eastern liberal democracy -- as Turkish scholar Ümit Cizre eloquently notes, "most of all, integration of human rights into a liberal democracy requires coming to terms with the past" (Cizre qtd. in Lee, 202).

aspires to be a world leader cannot be hypocritical in the realm of human rights -- especially considering its platform on human rights in, say, Syria.

On a more positive note, Turkey's relations with the United States (at least according to the Turkish foreign minister) have entered "a golden age" ("Erdogan at Bay"). This makes sense: Turkey holds military and political importance for the United States, and (at least on the first front) has been cooperative as a missile launching site and operations base for the broader Middle East. Beyond human rights violations and the perennial issue of Kurdish statehood, though, the problem that most threatens to derail this amicable era of US-Turkey relations is that of Turkey's "meltdown with Israel" ("Dormant Power Revival"). This rupture in Turkey's formerly cordial relationship with Israel comes in the aftermath of Israel's attack on a Turkish-led aid convoy headed for the Gaza Strip last year and, even earlier, when Israel attacked Gaza in December 2008, "just as Turkey was about to cement a deal between Israel and Syria" ("Dormant Power Revival"). Turkey's steadily worsening relationship with Israel (Turkey kicked out Israel's ambassador late last year) is a sticking point in this new foreign policy approach. The split with Israel puts Turkey's most important ally, America, "in an awkward position (especially close to the next presidential election)," but it also "reduces Turkish influence...particularly...in Syria" ("Dormant Power Revival"). As it grows into a regional power and increases its ties with other Islamic nations in the Middle East, Turkey must be careful not to radicalize (as has been the example of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood), but rather to continue to bridge -- as it does geographically and has done politically with Syria and Israel -- these important interests in the region.

6. Islamic Renaissance

It seems then that Turkey's revolutionary approach to Islam and democracy offers a beacon of light and hope for democracy in Muslim nations throughout the world. Light, in fact, is a consistent theme both in Turkish politics and in its particular brand of Islam: the Turkish word *ak* (the root for the AKP) means "white" or "clean" and the party's slogan is "continual light;" Nursi's *Epistle of Light* is Turkey's most influential piece of original theology, barring the poetry of Rumi. This is appropriate, given Turkey's gradual process of bringing light to illuminate the gray area occupied by mosque and state. This lightening of the state's heavy-handed control (and fear) of religion and the traditional culture it espouses, this recognition of true nationhood as a choice between memory and forgetting has resulted in a return to perhaps the single most fundamental principle of statehood -- freedom. This freedom allows Turks to acknowledge, finally, that by controlling religion, they are irrevocably bringing it into the public sphere. This freedom allows Turks to delve into religion -- whichever faith it may be -- as a true "search for truth and beauty," as Gülen suggests (Lee, 200). Turkey is poised for power and prosperity in a world that once deemed it irrelevant. This staggering turnaround, this realization that the principle of secularism, *laiklik*, does not "explain the complexities" inherent in religion and politics, seems to be a model of governance unto itself (Lee, 16 May). Turkey's current balance between state and mosque is reminiscent, although it doesn't yet go as far, of the American model of cultivating civic awareness and engagement through religious organizations and protecting, above all, freedom of expression.

Crucially, it is the only state of its kind in the Muslim world -- a thriving, liberal democracy that has experimented with *laïcité*, with erastianism and has rejected these principles to forge a new Islamic liberalism. In fact, in Turkey, the past eleven years of AKP rule have suggested that, in a country where the vast majority of citizens are Muslim, there must be a

symbiotic relationship between mosque and state: “religion has helped secure democracy, and democracy has restored religion as an element of Turkish identity (Lee, 196). Turkey’s political identity, always a work in progress, is now a mixture -- the potency of which is still under review -- that combines “religiosity, modernism, nationalism, liberalism, and democracy” (Lee, 196). As the Middle East attempts to nation-build after the revolutionary Arab Spring, this pluralism is an example for new nation-states. Although Turkey remains unique in its ability to draw on its pluralistic Ottoman heritage as well as the fact that it voluntarily westernized, this example of Turkish “exceptionalism” is one to be heeded (Lee, 197).¹² Turkey has sparked an intellectual and political Islamic renaissance -- a rediscovery of a rich cultural heritage that leaves room for science as “humanity’s common heritage,” that “cannot be opposed to aesthetics, art, beauty, and the expressions of beauty” (Gülen qtd. in Ünal, 61). This discovery has brought about an era of religious tolerance and democracy that, although still a work-in-progress, holds great promise for not only Turkey but also for the greater Middle East. It lightens the gloomy dawn of post-colonial secularism, it gives Turks a new identity, around which they have already coalesced. With religious liberties and truly democratic institutions, it sings the old songs in a new, modern key.

¹² Unlike all of the countries that underwent revolution as a part of the Arab Spring (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, etc.), Turkey was never colonized. This remains a point of pride for Turks, and has spared them the reactionary forces against modernization in many other Middle Eastern nations: for many denizens of these nations, modernity as introduced by colonizing powers meant nothing more than “replacing traditional morality with materialism, wantonness, and corruption” (Lee, 197).

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