



Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism

Lessons from Turkey's Struggle to Balance Democracy and Laiklik

APRIL 25, 2019 – MUSTAFA AKYOL

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In the beginning, there was the Ottoman Empire—initially a small state founded by a Muslim Turkish tribe, which gradually grew into a multiethnic, multireligious entity extending from Vienna to Yemen. Lasting for about six centuries, from the early fourteenth century to the end of World War I in the early twentieth, the empire left behind a definitive legacy with which Turks have been struggling ever since, in complex ways.

The Ottoman Empire was a Sunni Islamic state. Sharia, or Islamic law, constituted its fundamental legal system, while its sultans, after the conquest of Egypt in the early sixteenth century, bore the Islamic title “caliph.” Meanwhile, as early as the reign of Sultan Mehmed II (1451–81), the Sultans assumed the authority to issue new laws, called “kanun,” which were legitimized by sharia, but also separate from it—a secularity that would not be acceptable to the rigid legalists of Islam today, who consider sharia the only legitimate source of law. Fazlur Rahman Malik, one of the most prominent reformist Muslim scholars of the past century, grasped the importance of this Ottoman duality when he noted:

Although the state-made law was basically sanctioned by certain general principles in the sharia law itself, nevertheless a dichotomy of the sources

of law was unavoidable, and this process paved the way for the secularization of law in several Muslim countries most systematically in Turkey.¹

In the nineteenth century, this legislative authority of the Ottoman state grew, with the empire's decision to establish a European-style centralized bureaucracy and to import modern laws and institutions from Europe. The “Tanzimat,” or “Reform,” edict of 1839 was a key milestone in this process, initiating an era of modernization that would include establishing equal citizenship (ending the centuries-old “millet” system of religious hierarchy), more rights and opportunities for women, and the annulment of some of the illiberal aspects of sharia, such as the death penalty for apostasy. One of the key results of this process was the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, which read: “All subjects of the empire are called Ottomans, without distinction whatever faith they profess... Every Ottoman enjoys personal liberty on condition of non-interfering with the liberty of others.”²

The reforms were driven partly by Western and Russian pressure—those powers assumed the right to defend the Christian minorities in the Empire. But the reforms also arose from the Ottoman leaders' own hope to win the hearts and minds of their non-Muslim “nations” in the face

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/bold-agenda-school-integration/>

of the growing threat of separatist nationalism. As it turns out, this was the very threat that ultimately led the empire to collapse. As in other similar cases, historians and pundits have criticized the Ottomans for either doing too much reform or not doing enough.

How the reforms were justified is an interesting point to consider. In contemporary culture, legal reform in an Islamic state is often imagined to be realized through “ijtihad,” a concept that refers to a jurisprudential revision within Islamic law. Most of the Ottoman reforms, however, were established not through reforming sharia itself, but rather by rendering certain aspects of it obsolete. Apostasy was decriminalized, for example, not through reinterpretation of Islam’s classical verdict on it—the death penalty—but rather through a governmental decree guaranteeing that “the Musselman is now as free to become a Christian as the Christian is free to become a Musselman.”⁵

This state-driven process of reform had many achievements. By 1908, when the Ottoman Constitution was reestablished after being suspended for more than three decades by the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the empire had become a constitutional monarchy with a multiparty system—a very advanced point from where, say, Saudi Arabia is today. The fact that reforms were introduced with a language of utmost respect for Islam also helped minimize the scope of conservative reaction.

There was a downside of Ottoman modernization, however. The state-driven process of reform created an over-empowered state. As the traditional role of sharia, and the scholarly class (the “ulama”) that articulated it, shrank, the limitations on the power of the bureaucracy also eroded. There were attempts to fill the vacuum with liberal principles, articulated by intellectual groups such as the “New Ottomans,” and they had some influence on the making of the Ottoman Constitution and other key texts of the Tanzimat era. But ultimately the over-empowered state would render such shackles ineffective, and a newborn Leviathan called the “Turkish Republic” would assert its unlimited power to recreate the society in its own image. Today, Turkey finds itself at another moment in which the

definitions of secularism and the relationship between the government, religion, and the public sphere are all in flux. Just as in the Ottoman era, Turkish leaders’ approach to these changes will have repercussions for the greater region and the Muslim world more generally. A review of the history of secularism in Turkey—including its successes, failures, and unintended consequences—informs our understanding of the current moment. Further, putting Turkey’s contemporary transition into historical context can reveal paths to a future where secularism and democracy can coexist—a balance that has so far eluded the republic.

The Revolutionary Republic

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I in 1915 on the side of the Central Powers (led by Germany and Austria-Hungary), with the hope of reconquering some of its former territories. In the end, however, the opposite happened, and with the infamous Treaty of Sevres of 1920, the once mighty empire was reduced to a fiefdom in Anatolia—less than one-fifth of the current size of modern Turkey. This scheme was ultimately averted thanks to the War of Liberation (1919–22), fought mainly against the invading Greek army. When the war ended with Turkey’s victory, its key military leader, Mustafa Kemal, became a national hero. A year later, he announced the Turkish Republic and became its uncontested president until his death in 1938, having along the way adopted the surname “Atatürk,” or “Father of Turks.”

The Atatürk era in Turkey amounted to a single-party regime dominated by Atatürk’s People’s Republican Party, or CHP. It was not merely an autocratic regime that forbade dissent; it was also a revolutionary regime that wanted to transform society. Atatürk’s ideological blueprint, which came to be known as “Kemalism,” rested on two main pillars: Turkish nationalism and secularism. Both represented a clean break from the Ottoman past. Nationalism implied a nation-state built for Turks, in contrast to the multiethnic Ottoman Empire. And secularism implied that Islam would not be allowed to have any significant public role in this new, modern, Western-oriented republic.

Atatürk's "revolutions," as they are still praised in Turkish textbooks, were sweeping. The caliphate, an institution that symbolized Muslim political leadership since the Prophet Mohammed, was abolished in 1924, a year after the declaration of the republic. The "Ministry of Sharia" was disbanded, and Sufi orders and traditional madrasas (Islamic schools) were banned, leaving behind little trace of organized religion, while mosques were placed under government control. The Ottoman fez was banned and the European-style brimmed hat was imposed by law for government officials. The Islamic calendar was replaced with the Gregorian one, and the Arabic alphabet with the Latin. The teaching of Arabic was banned, as was, for a while in the 1930s, the performance of Turkish music. The goal was to make everyone enjoy "modern" (in other words, Western) tunes. Finally, the principle of "laiklik" (adopted from the French "laïcité") was established in the Constitution as a fundamental feature of the Turkish Republic, along with other "principles of Atatürk."

These "revolutions" were driven by a conviction shared by the Kemalists: religion, and in particular Islam, was an "obstacle to progress." Although they did not explicitly define themselves as antireligious, the Kemalists insisted that religion belonged in the "conscience of individuals" and not in the public sphere.⁴ "For Mustafa Kemal and his associates, the role of Islam in Ottoman society and politics was responsible for the failure to modernize," notes Binnaz Toprak, a Turkish political scientist.

The new republic would undertake a series of reforms both to emancipate the women and to destroy the influence of Islam in education, law, and public administration. At the same time, all religious brotherhoods of unorthodox Islam, the folk Islam—which they found to be the force behind the popular ignorance of rational thought—had to be banned in the effort to create a new nation of men and women who would be guided by positivist ideas of reason.⁵

Yet this ambitious effort to create the New Turk would prove to be only a half-success, leaving behind not a fully transformed Turkish society, but rather a bitterly divided one.

The Religious Opposition

Between the two main pillars of Kemalism, nationalism, and secularism, the former has gained almost universal acceptance in Turkish society—with the notable exception of the largest ethnic minority, which is the Kurds. (While other non-Turkish Muslim ethnic minorities—such as Bosnians, Albanians, Circassians, the Laz, and the Arabs—assimilated into the larger Turkish body, most Kurds retained a separate ethnic identity, and reacted to its suppression by the state.) Besides that Kurdish exception, whose political expression often claims some 10 percent of the electorate, nationalism in Turkey is today still the most powerful political idea and sentiment, cutting across party lines, including the Right-versus-Left or secular-versus-religious divide. It is an assimilationist nationalism that considers all ethnic groups in the nation as "Turks," except the officially recognized non-Muslim minorities such as Christians and Jews, despite the fact that not all of those ethnic groups necessarily self-identify as Turks.

The influence of Kemalist secularism, however, has been more limited. Certain parts of Turkish society, mostly the urban population, welcomed the Kemalist cultural revolution and became its self-appointed guardians, to keep the Kemalist revolution intact, generation after generation. The military, and other key elements of the Turkish bureaucracy such as the judiciary, became their bastions.

However, the majority of Turks opposed Kemalist secularism. This was repeatedly shown by election results, from the time of the first free and fair elections in 1950. The majority of Turks voted over and over again against staunchly secularist candidates. This majority was largely made up of either rural or newly urbanized citizens, who demanded more respect for religion and tradition than the Kemalists were willing to grant. Often dubbed as "conservatives," these more traditional Turks repeatedly brought Center-Right parties to power—the Democrat Party in the 1950s, the Justice Party

in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Homeland Party in the 1980s and 1990s. These parties never challenged secularism as such. They only advocated, and tried to implement, a more religion-friendly secularism.

Meanwhile, outright opposition to secularism has been a radical and even illegal concept. The only place the idea found a home, often implicitly rather than explicitly, was among Turkish Islamists, who appealed to some 10–15 percent of Turkish society, as indicated by election results and surveys. These Islamists consisted of Sufi orders; the popular “Nur” movement led by Said Nursi (1877–1960), along with its various offshoots, including the Gulen Movement; intellectuals, some of whom got inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979; and ordinary pious Turks who felt humiliated by a Westernized elite.⁶

Islamist poet Necip Fazıl powerfully expressed the Islamists’ feelings in his 1949 poem, “Sakarya.” “You are a stranger in your own home, a pariah in your own land,” Fazıl called on to the Anatolian river Sakarya, which stood as a metaphor for the traditional Turk. And at the end he made a powerful call: “You have crawled too long on your face; get up on your feet, Sakarya!” For decades this line would be reiterated in Islamic rallies by those who longed for the day they would really “get up on their feet,” and get their country back.

Politically, the Islamist energy found its mainstream expression in the movement led by Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), who first appeared in the late 1960s with his National Order Party.⁷ The term “national” was a euphemism for “Islamic,” as Kemalism and all its secular content was seen as a despicable import from the alien West.

Erbakan’s political parties were repeatedly closed down by the draconian state security courts, only to be reopened with a new name. In 1996, he became Turkey’s prime minister for the first time, thanks to a coalition government with a Center-Right party, but this only triggered what’s commonly referred to as Turkey’s “post-modern coup,” which began in February 1997 with the military’s ultimatum to the government. The staunchly secular generals who soon forced Erbakan to resign aimed at getting rid of an Islamist government. But

they also aimed at cracking down on “irtica”—a loaded Turkish term that literally means “going backwards” and which had become the official term for religious movements that challenged the Kemalist vision of a thoroughly secular society.

The Headscarf Controversy

During the “post-modern coup,” one of the key aims of the generals was to ban the Islamic headscarf in all schools and public buildings. Their concept followed the French notion of *laïcité*—French secularism—but took it to even more extreme levels. Accordingly, the presence of religious symbols in the public square had to be banned, for otherwise religion would take over and suffocate the secular citizens. It was, one could say, a doctrine of preemptive authoritarianism, since it was reacting to a speculative future threat, not one that had actually yet emerged.

The headscarf controversy began in the 1980s, when Turkish universities started experiencing something unprecedented: female students who wore the Islamic headscarf. The new phenomenon was caused by Turkey’s social transformation. In earlier decades, the families who would send their daughters to college were almost universally urban secular ones whose culture had little place for a dress code as conservative as the headscarf. Meanwhile, the traditional families whose culture did include the headscarf had little interest in giving higher education to their daughters, whose typical pattern was to get married soon after mandatory education.

With the growing urbanization and modernization of the conservative class, however, there emerged a new type of conservative family that sought higher education for its daughters. The more these “turbanites,” as the secularists dismissively called them, became more numerous and visible, the more the secularists felt uncomfortable. As a result, in 1982, under a military regime, the newly founded Higher Education Council (YOK), whose job was to oversee all universities, passed a circular order declaring, “All staff and students of institutions of higher education are required to have dress and attire that accord with the revolutions and principles of Atatürk and are of a civilized and modest shape.”⁸

To make it clearer what “civilized and modest shape” meant, the YOK further explained that female students had to “have their head uncovered and will not wear a headscarf while in the building of the institution.”

Thus the “headscarf war” began. Eventually, the conflict would become a key symbol of Turkey’s culture war, akin to the controversy over abortion in the United States. In the next three decades, secularists tried to impose the ban on the headscarf, which extended from the universities to other public buildings, including sometimes even hospitals. Meanwhile, Islamists, conservatives, and even secular liberals defended the right to wear a headscarf.

A key moment in this battle was the 1989 decision by the Turkish Constitutional Court, which annulled a law passed by parliament a year earlier stating that in universities the “hair and neck may be covered with headscarf or turban because of religious beliefs.” The court found in this law a violation of the constitutional principle of secularism, which it emphatically defined as not separation of state and religion, but rather “a way of life,” and a campaign against the “dogmatism of the Middle Ages.” The landmark decision read:

Laiklik is a way of life, which bases nationalization, independence, national sovereignty, and the ideal of humanity upon the prevalence of reason, freedom, and democracy that developed through the scientific Enlightenment by destroying the dogmatism of the Middle Ages.... Although, in a narrow sense, [laiklik] is defined as the separation of state affairs from those of religion, it is, indeed, widely accepted in the literature that it signifies the last stage of the intellectual and organizational evolution that societies have experienced. Laiklik is a social breakthrough based on sovereignty, democracy, freedom and information as well as a contemporary regulator of political, social and cultural life...⁹

This was a clear statement that Turkish secularism wasn’t about the separation of church and state. Instead, it was

about the state’s duty to secularize society by imposing a “way of life” that had no visible trace of traditional religion.

In 1991, the same constitutional court further explained why Turkish secularism “has a historical particularity” and that it must be practiced “in a different way from the West.” It also warned that any legal attempt by Parliament to set the headscarf free in the public square “bases public regulation upon religious provisions and, thus, is against the principle of laiklik.”¹⁰

Turkey’s authoritarian secularists purported to accept religion as long as it remained in its place, in the conscience of individuals, but they found headscarf-wearing a bridge too far. So too, when religious individuals tried to create civil society organizations based on their faith, secularists intervened to supposedly protect “freedom.” The main concern of Turkish secularists was freedom *from* religion, and almost never freedom *of* religion.

A Way Out: Soft Secularism

For any serious Muslim with a commitment to practice his religion and manifest it in society, Kemalist secularism was difficult to accept. It was identified with humiliating bans, and also constant harassment of Islamic communities and their opinion leaders. Therefore, overthrowing the secular order and enacting in its place an Islamic regime became a kind of utopian goal among the Islamists.

However, the larger conservative majority found a more pragmatic solution: supporting the forces that advocated a softer, more liberal, more religion-friendly secularism. These forces included Center-Right political parties, and, especially in the 1990s and onward, “the liberals” as a new intellectual force that defied both the secularism and the nationalism of the Kemalist establishment as oppressive doctrines. Among these anti-Kemalist circles, the differences between American (or “Anglo-Saxon”) and French versions of secularism became an oft-repeated theme.

In the first decade of the new millennium, the two key main actors of pro-Islamic politics—the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan,

and its best ally at the time, the Gulen Movement—both championed the American way versus the French one. As late as 2014, the pundit Hilal Kaplan, one of the staunchest supporters of Erdoğan, was proudly noting that “the majority of Islamist actors and movements in Turkey,” including Erdoğan’s AKP, “have patterned themselves on the Anglo-Saxon democracies” with the ambition to “establish individual rights and freedoms.”¹¹

A deeper and more theoretical approach was offered by the United States-based Turkish academic Ahmet Kuru with his 2009 book, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*.¹² Kuru argued that in France and Turkey the dominant ideology is “assertive secularism,” which aims to exclude religion from the public sphere, whereas in the United States, it is “passive secularism,” which tolerates the public visibility of religion. He also argued for the merits of the latter model. The book was published in English but was also reproduced in Turkish, and supplied the conservative media with helpful intellectual ammunition against the secularists.

The redefinition of secularism as the guarantee of religious freedom has allowed the AKP to actualize all the major demands of its religious base without ever challenging the constitutional principle of laiklik. In the early 2010s the headscarf ban gradually vanished in all state institutions. Sufi orders and other Islamic communities found more freedom—and in fact, privilege—than ever before, at least as long as they supported the government. In April 2017, Erdoğan oversaw a major amendment to the Turkish Constitution, transforming the century-old parliamentary system into a presidential one—but he did not touch the place of laiklik in the Constitution. After all, the way that laiklik was being interpreted made it increasingly defanged, and it no longer created a major problem for Turkey’s pro-Islamic majority.

However, any objective observer can see that laiklik still creates many problems for other segments of Turkish society. The Sunni majority keeps enjoying the blessings of state support for their faith—evident everywhere from the huge budget of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which finances all mosques with taxpayer money, to the

education system, which includes compulsory pro-Sunni religious education. Minorities can easily feel excluded. Turkey’s largest religious minority, the Alevi, do not enjoy any support for their houses of worship.¹³ Turkey’s tiny non-Muslim communities—Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and Syriac Christians—have seen some progress in their rights during the AKP era, but most of them still have rightful demands that have not been met yet.

Will Turkish Secularism Survive under the AKP?

For most Turkish observers, there is a stark gap between the AKP of the first decade of this millennium and that of the 2010s. In the former era, the AKP had a widely appreciated record of liberal political reforms and economic success. That is why the party was supported by a wide range of Turkish and European liberals and was seen by Western capitals or the media as the iconic model of Islamists’ capacity to turn into Muslim democrats.

This positive image, however, gradually turned into a grim one in the 2010s. As the AKP consolidated power and became the very establishment it used to struggle with, it lost interest in liberal reforms. The party tilted toward corruption, nepotism, and ultimately authoritarianism. All this happened in tandem with the concentration of all power in the hands of Erdoğan and the rise of a cult of personality venerating “The Chief.” As of 2018, Turkey had become a case study of how democracies can devolve into authoritarian regimes.

There is one irony in this story, though: While the AKP’s struggle with laiklik had marked the first decade of the new century, laiklik turned into a non-issue in the following decade. Neither the main opposition party, the CHP, nor other opposition forces blamed the AKP for undermining laiklik any longer. Instead, they blamed the party, and especially Erdoğan, for other misdeeds, such as cracking down on opposition, silencing the press, making the judiciary subservient, and other themes related to authoritarianism. As for “secularism and religiosity,” they have become “not an issue anymore,” as Speaker of the Parliament Binali Yıldırım said in November 2018.¹⁴

These developments, as we have noted, are partly due to the fact that the AKP got from laiklik what it wanted: a reinterpretation of the principle as merely a basis for the religious freedom of the party's conservative voters. Meanwhile, the CHP realized that the authoritarian secularism that it had championed for decades had only alienated it from the conservative majority. The "new CHP" that began to take form under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who has led the party since 2010, toned down the rhetoric on secularism and focused on other issues. (This has led to some increase in the CHP's votes, but not enough to win elections.)

But does this mean that laiklik has permanently become a non-issue in Turkey, and that pro-Erdogan conservatives are content with a soft secular state that gives them all the religious freedom they want?

It may be too early to answer this question. First, the Erdogan regime may have many years ahead. Second, we have seen that Erdogan has been capable of using different narratives and having different allies in the different phases of his political career. A more explicitly Islamist Erdogan regime thus cannot be ruled out.

An Islamist Roadmap

To get a better sense of what Turkey's new ruling elites think of secularism, it may be helpful to listen to their opinion leaders, one of whom is Hayretin Karaman. As a professor emeritus of Islamic law and a longtime columnist of the Islamist daily *Yeni Şafak*, he is a prominent authority in Turkey's conservative Islamic circles. He is also a staunch supporter of the Erdogan regime.

In his column, Karaman has repeatedly addressed the issue of whether living under a secular regime is preferable for Muslims, and, if not, what they are supposed to do. In one of his most notable pieces, "Living as a Muslim in the Secular Order," he argued that while it is nice that a democratic-secular system allows Muslims to freely practice their religion, it is not enough. Islam also demands "Islamization," Karaman wrote, and that in turn requires that the "flaws"

in religious practice "are kept secret, and good morals are manifest." Therefore, Karaman argued, "it is very difficult for Muslims who live in the laic-secular systems to protect their religion and culture." Sins cannot be banned and "they can even be advertised in the media."¹⁵ Karaman does not see the practical incrementalism of Turkey's recent leaders as the way to achieve these goals. "No doubt, the primal duty is to change the order," he wrote. But he also acknowledged that such total reform "is not easily done" and requires "following a long and narrow road." In the meantime, he added, governments with a "religious and ideological inclination" can "tilt" toward Islam, while Islamic civil society works hard to win hearts and minds.¹⁶

In the Turkey of 2018, one can observe that the soft Islamization Karaman envisioned is already in progress. The AKP government is indeed trying to "tilt" society toward its own understanding of Islam through various measures. These include increasing the number of state-sponsored religious schools; sanitizing the national education system by excluding themes like the Darwinian theory of evolution; discouraging alcohol consumption with extremely high taxes on alcoholic beverages and banning their advertising and promotion; and imposing "national and spiritual values" on mass media through the grip of the "Radio and Television Supreme Council." Meanwhile, Islamic civil society, with the full support of the government, is thriving in terms of resources and outreach.

This suggests that if the political dominance of Turkey's Islamic camp continues in the years and perhaps decades to come, the "long and narrow road" that Karaman mentioned could then be taken, and secularism can further be eroded to open the way for an explicitly Islamic order.

However, the efforts of Karaman and other Turkish Islamists who hope to see a more Islamized Turkey are also having an unforeseen consequence: a powerful secular reaction. Similar to the conservatives' reaction to Kemalism, many Turks are developing a reaction to the authoritarian, corrupt, and crude expressions of Islam that have become associated with Erdogan's "New Turkey."

As a result, as I recently explained in an article, “Why So Many Turks Are Losing Faith in Islam,” worldviews alternative to Islam, such as deism, are spreading fast in Turkish society. Turkey’s conservatives, with their usual belief in foreign conspiracies, try to explain this away as yet another foreign plot to weaken the nation’s spiritual basis. But even some exceptionally self-critical conservatives admit the reality: what has made Islam quite unpopular in the past decade is primarily the behavior of those who claim to act in the religion’s name. This includes scandalously archaic, irrational, bigoted, or misogynist views of some of the religious scholars who have found much more confidence—and air time—than ever before. It also includes the unabashed exploitation of Islam by politicians—especially those from the ruling AKP. Islamists’ own behavior in positions of power is pushing people away from the faith they claim to uphold.¹⁷

Turkish social scientist Volkan Ertit has written that “God is dying Turkey,” in line with most modern Western societies. In his view, despite the “clear Islamic sensitivities” of the party that has ruled Turkey since 2002, data shows that “praying rates have decreased, extramarital sexual [relationships have] become prevalent... the belief in virginity is a point of honour for fewer people... [and] traditional family structures have been shattered.” He argues that “the classical theory of secularization, which claims that modernization leads to secularization, can still explain not only the social transformation seen in historically Christian and Western European countries and their offshoots, but also the social transformation of Turkey.”¹⁸

In other words, just as Kemalism’s effort to de-Islamize Turkey only proved to be a half success, Erdoganism’s nascent effort to re-Islamize Turkey will most likely prove to be a half-success as well—and, similarly, will only help further divide Turkish society, rather than fully transform it.

Toward Evolutionary Secularism

In the late Ottoman Empire, de facto secularization aimed to create a non-confessional Ottoman identity that could embrace all Ottoman citizens. This liberal effort achieved a lot for its time, though it was relatively short-lived. In contrast, the revolutionary efforts at secularization in Turkey in the

modern era produced a whiplash effect, and proved unable to sustain without authoritarian control. This suggests that the best path to secularization may well be evolutionary, in the mold of the United Kingdom, rather than the revolutionary path, as exemplified by France. Constitutional monarchies in the Arab world today, such as Jordan and Morocco, which are considerably freer than most Arab states, can be seen as Ottoman-like models of gradual modernization.¹⁹

Turkey’s story, however, also serves as a warning. Secularization achieved by the wrong means may not give birth to a liberal state, but rather to a draconian one unchecked by all traditional constraints as well as modern ones. The main secular regimes in the Arab world—the republican dictatorships in Egypt, Syria, and pre-2003 Iraq—are testimonies to this colossal problem.

The secularism of the young Turkish Republic was just too radical and illiberal to be accepted by pious segments of Turkish society. It did introduce some admirable reforms in a top-down fashion, such as advancing women’s rights, but its authoritarianism created opposition—an opposition that manifested not just as resistance to the authoritarianism but also to the secularism that came along with it. This opposition may yet prove to be Turkish secularism’s demise. It is unfortunate that this is the main model of secularism the Muslim world has been exposed to, whereas the more benign models of the secular state are largely unknown.

Admittedly, there is a counterargument to the proposition above: that a top-down secularism is necessary to push a deeply religious society into a secular future. That is how modern values take root in society, the argument goes, while suppressing some freedoms for the greater good. (This is the argument of “benevolent authoritarianism,” often made by the Kemalists.) Since the alternative of liberal secularism in a deeply religious society has never been tried in the Muslim world, it is hard to weigh this argument. Ultimately, one’s subjective preference may depend on what one prioritizes: liberalism or secularism. (This author prioritizes the former.)

The Turkish conservatives’ longtime preference for an American-type liberal secularism provides a promising

lesson, showing how Islam can be compatible with a secular order. The literature produced in Turkey about this Islamic-liberal synthesis is worth exploring and expanding. However, it is also true that no matter how Islam-friendly a secular model is, it will not be enough for Islamists who believe that religion—and its “morals”—should dominate the public space. For liberal secularism to thrive, mainstream classical Islam, as articulated by jurists such as Karaman, must take reformist steps to abandon this deep-seated triumphalism, and to accept being only one of the competing value systems in an open society.

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Author

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Notes

- 1 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 156.
- 2 “The Ottoman Constitution (23 December 1876),” *Türk Anayasa Hukuku Sitesi* (Turkish Constitutional Law Website), accessed December 3, 2018, <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1876constitution.htm>.
- 3 See Selim Deringil, “There Is No Compulsion in Religion: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839–1856,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 3 (July 2000): 547–75. The quote uses a common English term for “Muslim” from the nineteenth century.
- 4 More literally, Recep Peker, the general secretary of Atatürk’s CHP, said in 1936: “In Turkey, religious considerations cannot go beyond the skin of the body of the citizen... It has no place in society, administration or politics.” (Recep Peker, “Uluslaşma-Devletleşme,” *Ülkü Halkevleri Mecmuası* 7, no. 41 (July 1936): 3. Over the decades, the idea that religion can exist “only in the conscience of individuals” became common parlance in Kemalist Turkey.
- 5 Binnaz Toprak, “Secularism and Islam: The Building of Modern Turkey,” *Macalester International* 15, art. 9 (2005), <http://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/macintl/vol15/iss1/9>.
- 6 The Gulen Movement became a decisive political actor in the 2010s, with its immense power in the bureaucracy, as first the best ally and then the worst enemy of the Justice and Development Party governments led by Erdogan. The group’s apparent involvement in the failed coup attempt in 2016 totally criminalized and delegitimized it inside Turkey, leaving it with room to maneuver only abroad, especially in the West.
- 7 Known in Turkish as “Milli Nizam Partisi.”
- 8 Dilek Cindoğlu, “Headscarf Ban and Discrimination: Professional Headscarved Women in The Labor Market,” *Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation* (Istanbul: TESEV Publications, 2011), 34, http://tese.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Headscarf_Ban_And_Discrimination.pdf.
- 9 “The Changing View of the Turkish Constitutional Court in Defining the Laiklik,”

Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://ps-europe.org/the-changing-view-of-the-turkish-constitutional-court-in-defining-the-laiklik/>. Some grammatical corrections have been made to the quoted translation.

- 10 “The Changing View of the Turkish Constitutional Court.”
- 11 Hilal Kaplan, “‘Secularist’ Erdoğan,” *Daily Sabah*, July 16, 2014, https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/hilal_kaplan/2014/07/16/secularist-erdogan.
- 12 Ahmet Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 13 Alevis share many beliefs with Shia Islam, though most do not identify as Shias. They follow a less legalist interpretation of Islam, where strict rules and rituals are replaced with moral preaching and unorthodox rituals such as the “cem,” which brings men and women together for a folkloric dance.
- 14 “Laik-dindar çatışması geride kaldı” (The Religious-Secular Conflict Is a Thing of the Past), *Yeni Şafak*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/laik-dindar-catismasi-geride-kaldi-3409096>.
- 15 “Laik Düzendeki Müslümanca Yaşamak” (Living as a Muslim in the Secular Order), *Yeni Şafak*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hayrettinkaraman/laik-duzende-muslumanca-yaamak-2030153>.
- 16 “Living as a Muslim in the Secular Order.”
- 17 “Why So Many Turks Are Losing Faith in Islam,” *Al-Monitor*, April 16, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-why-so-many-turks-are-losing-faith-in-islam.html>.
- 18 Ertit, “God Is Dying in Turkey as Well: Application of Secularization Theory to a Non-Christian Society,” *Open Theology* 4, no. 1 (2014): 192–211.
- 19 That Morocco and Jordan are freer than most Arab states (with the single exception of Tunisia) is suggested by the “Freedom in the World” map by Freedom House, (accessed December 7, 2018), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>, as well as the Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index (accessed December 7, 2018), <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index>.