

## **Islamic Political Identity in Turkey**

*M. Hakan Yavuz*

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During the events that led to the “soft coup” of the Erbakan-Çiller coalition government in 1997, the Turkish military declared that the number one threat to national security was not Kurdish separatism, but Islamic radicalism. Despite this shift in security strategy, the Justice and Development party, which was born from the ashes of Erbakan’s openly Islamist Refah party, won a decisive victory at the polls in November 2002. These series of events from Turkey’s recent history have raised many questions in the minds of observers, both international and domestic, as to the nature and strength of Islamic political and social movements in the Republic of Turkey – a state that since its birth in 1923 had undergone a systematic program of westernization and secularization.

In his *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, M. Hakan Yavuz attempts to answer these very questions by providing a comprehensive analysis of the main Muslim social groups that have come to dominate Turkish-Muslim society, namely, the Nakshibendi Sufi orders and the Nurcu movement. These groups have made significant inroads into Turkish civil society, crossing class, regional, and ethnic lines, by taking advantage of new opportunity spaces in the market, the print media, and education. This was a direct result of the political and economic liberalization policies of the Özal government during the 1980s.

As the author argues, “the secularizing, state-centric elite failed effectively to penetrate and transform traditional society, and was similarly unsuccessful in developing an alternative value system and associational life for the rural population of society” (p. 4). Thus, the social and ethical vacuum created by the Kemalists was appropriated by a diverse group of Islamic social movements that were then urbanized by way of the *gecekondus*, the shanty-towns built overnight by rural migrants to the big cities during the 1960s and 1970s. These movements, which were silently germinating in the Anatolian countryside, underwent what Yavuz aptly terms the “vernacular-

ization of modernity” or the “internal secularization of Islam” (p. 5). This occurred when their traditional, religious outlook was forced to come to terms with that of science and modernity, as well as the often dynamic lifestyle and pace of the big cities.

This process led many of these movements to adopt an alternative project of modernization: to carve out their own unique Turkish-Muslim identity and to work within a legal democratic structure. In fact, the author concludes that the vast majority of these movements are not reactionary at all, but are labeled as such by the Kemalists to avoid the democratization of Turkey in order to stay in definitive control of the state. Thus, the author’s work can be categorized with other writers who share similar attitudes, such as Nilüfer Göle, Ismail Kara, Serif Mardin, and Mete Tunçay, who have argued that if given the freedom to move and grow, these movements can be a means toward a democratic and pluralistic society that can only benefit Turkey as a whole.

As mentioned earlier, the groups and movements examined have their roots in the Anatolian Sufi traditions, primarily the various Nakshibendi orders and the movement centered around the teachings of Said Nursi (1876-1960), popularly known as the Nurcu. In chapter 6, Yavuz presents a concise but informative history of the Nakshibendi order from the beginnings of the republic to the present day, as well as a brief summary of the most influential Nakshibendi brotherhoods, such as the one led by Mehmet Zahit Kotku (1897-1980), who acted as the spiritual guide for many key Turkish politicians, such as Özal, Erbakan, and Erdogan; the inward looking Erenköy Cemaati of Mehmet Esad Efendi (1847-1931); and the Süleymanci movement of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959), the defenders of “Sunni-Hanafi-Ottoman” Islam.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Nurcu’s print-based movement. The author also takes us inside the actual inner workings of this group by attending one of the many *dershanes* (meetings), where the works of Said Nursi are discussed and contemplated by his followers. The following chapter satisfactorily completes this discussion with a study of one of the most prominent Turkish-Islamist movements to have spawned from the Nurcu’s textual communities: the Neo-Nur Movement of Fethullah Gülen, which, despite accusations of being a reactionary movement, has often been the voice for a normative, forward-looking Islam.

Yavuz does a satisfactory job of presenting these movements as not reactionary, but rather as positive agents for Turkish society. He even portrays Turkish Islamism as being unreceptive to the radical writings of Mawdudi and Qutb (pp. 177, 273). However, we know that many of these

works have been translated and circulating in Turkey for some time. Indeed, if we are to fully understand the nature of the Islamist groups in Turkey, it would have been prudent to at least identify what these reactionary elements are, no matter how marginal they may actually be. And yet, the author failed to do this.

The concept of a unique, Turkish Islam has also been presented. Yavuz attributes much of these movements' success to Turkish Islam's pluralistic nature, which derives from its origins as "a frontier Islam that is in constant evolution as a result of the tension between heterodox and orthodox Muslims" (p. 273). Though I have little trouble accepting this assertion, it may still draw the ire of certain scholars who adhere to the existing narrative of the history of Islamic thought in this region. Indeed, what is generally understood of Ottoman-Turkish Islamic thought in current western scholarship is severely limited and probably would not support many of the author's claims. Yavuz does not provide the necessary research to support such assertions (which is beyond the scope of this work), nor does he guide us to any other sources that could lend it help. In the last two decades, however, Turkish scholarship has undertaken significant work in this area in the various faculties of divinity in Turkish universities. Such scholarship has yet to penetrate western academia, which would no doubt vindicate the author.

All in all, *Islamic Political Identity* is an enlightening work that helps to extricate an important facet of Turkish society from the clutches of the prevailing media and state information sources that have misrepresented it for far too long. It will be a welcome resource for students and scholars of contemporary Turkey as well as Turkish-Islamic religious thought.

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