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Are Muslim Democrats a Threat to Secularism and Freedom of Religion?

The Turkish Case

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Three events involving religious groups occurred in Turkey in the fall of 2010. The first was the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which started on August 11 and culminated with the end of Ramadan celebrations on September 9, which drew millions of participating Turks. There is nothing unusual in this annual event, so much a part of the social and cultural landscape of Turkey. The other two events indicate potential transformations in the rights of non-Muslims and unorthodox Muslims amid the shifting of powers between secular Kemalists and Muslim democrats who came to power in 2002. On September 14 thousands of Orthodox Greeks from around the world gathered at the Sumela Monastery for a liturgy after its closure eighty-eight years ago. On September 19 hundreds of Orthodox Armenians, some of whom traveled from Armenia, worshipped in the newly renovated Akdamar Orthodox Church.

The two events involving non-Muslims suggest growing acceptance of pluralism and religious freedom in a country where many issues once regarded as taboo are openly discussed, such as cultural rights for the Kurds, claims of the heterodox Alevi community, rights for the Roma people, the opening of Halki Seminary, belonging to the Greek Orthodox community, and changing the military-imposed constitution of 1980. Major developments are taking place to democratize Turkey under a conservative government whose religious identity was met with skepticism and suspicion at the beginning of their term. In contrast to claims that Muslim democrats have a hidden agenda of gradually Islamizing the country, Turkey's new direction is set for full membership in the European Union and institutionalization of its values, though there is resistance from Germany and France to Turkey's membership on predominantly cultural grounds. Turco-skeptics in Europe propose a "privileged partnership/membership"

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instead of full accession.[1] Although there is negotiation fatigue and slow progress, incidents such as those described earlier clearly illustrate Turkey's new direction and provide a powerful answer to the question of whether Muslim democrats in power are implementing religious policies to establish an Islamic state or consolidating liberal and secular democracy.

On May 19, 2007, the Akdamar Church (the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross), a 1,100-year-old place of worship on Akdamar Island on Lake Van in eastern Anatolia, was opened as a museum after being renovated by the Turkish government, which is led by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). Senior officials attended the opening ceremony following its $1.5 million restoration, which saved the neglected building and its intricate wall carvings depicting biblical scenes.[2] Calls were made by several figures, including Patriarch Mesrob II, spiritual leader of the Armenian Orthodox community in Turkey, that the AK Party government should open up the restored church for worship at least once a year. The government responded positively to this call, and the worship service was held in the fall of 2010.

Reception of this extraordinary event by the local people, which contradicts old habits of the state, is a clear indication of where Turkish society is heading. Because the hotels were fully booked, a campaign was launched in Van to host Armenian visitors who wanted to witness the historical ceremony at the Akdamar Church. A large number of local Muslim families volunteered to host Armenians, which seems unthinkable to many people given the supposedly deeply rooted hostility between the Turks and the Armenians. People in Van deconstructed such images by opening their homes to Armenians, who accepted the invitations. An optimist might read the restoration of the Akdamar Church as a museum and its opening for a religious ceremony even once a year by the Turkish government as an act of goodwill. The beginning of people-to-people relations on such occasions can be regarded as the first step in reconciliation, which should be expanded and consolidated by the Turks and the Armenians on state and civil levels.

Sumela Monastery, on the Black Sea in northeastern Turkey, was founded in 386 and went through ups and downs throughout the centuries. When it fell into the hands of Muslim Turks following the conquest of Istanbul, it remained untouched and continued its educational and spiritual activities uninterrupted. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the last religious ceremony was probably held in 1923, before a large-scale population exchange took place between Turkey and Greece.

As the Sumela and Akdamar events indicate, there are hopeful signs of an increasing toleration and acceptance of minority religions and the recognition of other identities and lifestyles, in the form of the Kurdish and Alevi initiatives, launched by the AK Party. No other political parties since the establishment of modern Turkey were able to take such bold steps to democratize the country and publicly recognize the grievances of its marginalized and neglected minorities.

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In contrast to claims that the AK Party is consolidating conservatism and preparing grounds for social pressure on groups who don't share its ideology, by looking at the reforms since 2002 one can strongly argue that the AK Party is bringing Turkey closer to Western standards of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and equal citizenship. Moreover by opening itself to the world through trade and active foreign policy, Turkey is becoming a more engaged actor in international affairs and integrated into the Western system, which motivates Turkey for further democratization and transparency. Therefore the debate on Turkey should focus on who the agents of democratization and transformation are and the role that the AK Party government played in this process, not on the outdated cliché that Islam and democracy are incompatible and that Muslims fail to recognize the rights of laicists, Kemalists, unorthodox communities, and non-Muslim minorities.

Contextualizing the Debate in Turkey

The two events described earlier took place in a political environment dominated by the AK Party, which is constantly accused by its adversaries of having a secret agenda of establishing an Islamic state, despite categorical denials by party leadership. A fear circulated in Turkey is that under the AK Party government, religious conservatism is on the rise and is transforming Turkish society, creating social pressure on people to conform to Islamic ideals in such matters as alcohol consumption, clothing, and religious observance. Although these claims are frequently repeated, there are no legal regulations, court decisions, large-scale sociological evidence, or a record of complaints that might indicate this strong move in a conservative direction. However, there is discussion of what Şerif Mardin termed "neighborhood pressure."[3] It is argued that the ideology of the governing AK Party encourages like-minded people to force others to conform to conservative lifestyles.

Binnaz Toprak, who is one of the leading proponents of this view, bases her claims on field research results involving a sample of over four hundred people in thirteen cities in Turkey.[4] Toprak's report indicates that "neighborhood pressure" is manifold, and many people with a different view, appearance, faith, and lifestyle from that of the majority faced some degree of discrimination either from government bureaucrats or from the majority group. She argues that since the AK Party came to power, there has been an increase in conservative pressure, especially in rural Turkey.

However, contrary evidence points to the "cultural mosaic" of Turkish society that appreciates and accepts diversity. Hakan Yılmaz found in his 2006 survey involving a sample of 1,644 that 75 percent of participants are not disturbed by unveiled women, and 93 percent do not feel uncomfortable by veiled women, a result indicating that there is large-scale acceptance of the practice of veiling. The same research also found that 79 percent of the survey participants do not

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agree with the view that others should be forced to accept the religious beliefs and lifestyles of a particular group.[5] A recent survey of nearly 2,200 individuals indicates that 80 percent of the respondents do not face discrimination or pressure by other sectors of society because of the way they describe themselves. However, the same research does show that "otherness" is a common denominator when it comes to discrimination and social pressure. When asked which group is discriminated against the most, 37.5 percent said veiled women, 18 percent said the Kurds, 5.5 percent said Alevis, 4.5 percent said women wearing all-black attire (chador), 3.5 percent said secularists, and 7 percent said all these groups, including atheists, face discrimination. Each social, ethnic, or faith group claims that its political and cultural identity faces discrimination more than others.[6]

Although social pressure and discrimination are often attributed to religious conservatism in Turkey, there is almost no mention of how secular elites, who see themselves as the bearers of republican values, can contribute to discrimination. Indeed the secular Kemalist state discriminates against Alevis and Roma, not to mention Muslims, while ultranationalists have denied Kurdish rights and identity. Recent research on "elites and social distance" indicates that respondents who were educated in prestigious schools and enjoy higher-status jobs have less proximity than Muslims to the Kurds, which makes them more indifferent to the Kurdish problem. The same research demonstrates that secular elites believe that the AK Party has a hidden agenda of turning Turkey into a more conservative country. Muslim newcomers to power are seen as "occupiers" against republican secular values. Thus many secular elites favor closure of the AK Party, though in principle they affirm democratic values. As far the headscarf is concerned, veiled women are regarded as "others" by elite respondents and seen as a threat. Moreover the elite social environment is largely closed to veiled women, an isolation that produces "essentialist" views toward such others.[7]

Although one should acknowledge the presence of various forms of discrimination in the workplace, in state institutions, and in society, these are neither the product of the AK Party government nor can all be attributed to Muslim democrats. Moreover there is no evidence that Muslim democrats advocate such attitudes and practices. On the contrary, it was Muslim democrats in the current government who initiated direct talks with the Kurds, the Alevis, and the Roma people for the first time as state representatives in republican history. Therefore Toprak's findings should be interpreted within the context of the historical trajectory of state building and concomitant modernization in Turkey, which largely aimed at forming a homogeneous identity. Given democratization trends, new entrepreneurs, rising middle classes, civil society participation, wide access to education, and plurality in the media, the Kemalist state can no longer exercise the same militant power to preserve the status quo. In this context, when various subidentities make public claims they are perceived as a threat by Kemalists.

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A recent survey of over 1,800 respondents on identity perceptions of self and others confirms the observation that Kemalists are not immune to processes of "othering" those whose differences are seen as a threat to their own values or lifestyles.[8]

Modern Turkey was established on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, which was predominantly a Muslim kingdom with multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual social structures. The Ottoman Empire managed to govern such a diverse territory through multiple agencies and mechanisms. The disintegration of the empire led to the establishment of more than thirty nation-states (including the Republic of Turkey) in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa, where the Ottomans reigned for centuries. As new systems of political organization, nation-states, by their very nature, distance themselves from their immediate past, with the objective of creating homogeneous political communities and a sense of belonging formed on the basis of shared identity, culture, myths, and legacy. The formation of modern nation-states took place through a secular discourse rather than a religious one because such polities sought to liberate the community from religious alliances and build loyalty to the secular state rather than the religious establishment.

The Turkish model of the state-religion system has evolved over the years from that of having Islam as a state religion in the first constitution to a strongly secular state since then. The aim of this chapter is to first examine the development of state-religion relations and law in Turkey and then explore the ideological, religious, and legal trajectories in secular nations with predominantly Muslim populations. The case of Turkey provides an opportunity to see that countries with Muslim majorities took different paths in their management of religious affairs than their counterparts in Europe.

Secularism, State, and Religion in Modern Turkey

The establishment of a modern nation-state in Turkey crystallized the ideological orientation of the republican elite that aimed to reshape the state and its institutions on the basis of a secular model inspired by the West. Political, social, and religious developments in modern Turkey were influenced by the ideals of modernism and secularism. As Nilüfer Göle argued, "Since its foundation, Turkey's political elites voluntarily attempted the most radical secularization among the Muslim countries. The principle of democracy was secondary to that of state secularism."[9] This observation indicates that secularism was accepted as the state ideology above every other orientation at the expense of liberties as experienced especially during single-party rule in the country until 1950.

Inspired by the principles of modernization, sweeping changes were introduced in Turkish society. Secularization reforms, which were undertaken during the first decade of the new republic, aimed at minimizing the role of religion in

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every walk of Turkish society. The motive behind the secularization program was to reduce the societal significance of religious values and eventually disestablish cultural and political institutions marked by Islam. Reforms during the formative period of the republic were aimed at undermining the legacy of the Ottoman social, political, and cultural influence to establish a modern and secular framework to define the new Turkish nation. In an attempt "to eliminate every symbol that had a relationship with the Ottoman-Islamic heritage" and to radically "break from the Ottoman era,"[10] earlier reforms included abolition of the caliphate (1924), closure of religious shrines (*türbes*) and the dervish lodges (*tekkes*) (1925), abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations (1924), removing an article from the constitution that declared Islam as the state religion (1928), "Turkification" of the call to prayer (1932), and change of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin (1928), which meant a complete disconnection from cultural and literary products of the past.[11]

The state elite wished to purify the Turkish language and therefore cleansed it of its Arabic and Islamic influences deemed to counteract inculcation of a secular identity through literature, education, and the media. With the introduction of the Latin alphabet, books, magazines, newspapers, and official documents were placed in the archives for years to come. Other major reforms between 1924 and 1935 included the acceptance of the Western style of clothing, the adoption of the Gregorian calendar (1926), the introduction of Western music in schools, the change of the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday, adoption of the Swiss civil and Italian penal codes, and the adoption of laws pertaining to the unification of education (1924),[12] which facilitated the emergence of secular myths, symbols, and rituals. Şerif Mardin, a leading sociologist, notes that "between 1918 and 1939 Turks embarked on a major identity switch. This involved a change in status, from subjects of a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan empire to citizens of a republic that set down and affirmed its true Turkishness."[13]

Religion and Secularism in the Constitution

Constitution

As noted earlier, the Turkish system of state-religion relations evolved, gradually moving away from being a constitutionally Islamic state and anchoring in a strongly secular state. The Constitution of 1924 included the declaration "[T]he religion of the Turkish Republic is Islam."[14] In 1928, however, this declaration was removed from the Constitution, and secularism as a constitutional principle was added in 1937.[15] Although the Turkish state is defined as secular, it has incorporated religion in its bureaucracy with the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), which is a constitutional public body with a mandate

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to administer religious affairs for Muslims.[16] The Directorate was established in 1924, when the Ministry of Religion and Pious Foundations was abolished.

Directorate of Religious Affairs

The 1961 Constitution organized the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a constitutional institution and gave it a constitutional set of duties and responsibilities.[17] Thus it is sometimes argued that the republican elite inherited and preserved an Ottoman legacy, albeit in different forms and with different functions.[18] There is also a contrasting view that considers the Directorate as "an administrative tool to propagate official ideology regarding Islam" in the absence of an organized body of clergy and a central organization set up by Muslims.[19] The 1982 Constitution, which was accepted following the 1980 military coup, also recognized the constitutional status of the Directorate. Article 136 of the current Constitution states, "The Directorate of Religious Affairs, which is within the general administration, shall exercise its duties prescribed in its particular law, in accordance with the principles of secularism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity."[20] The particular law pertaining to the Directorate, which was passed in 1965, explains the Directorate's objectives and its scope of activities and responsibilities as follows: "to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshipping places."[21]

Over the years constitutional mandates and duties have empowered the Directorate as a public institution that receives its entire operating budget from the state and employs approximately 80,000 people throughout Turkey. The Directorate administers all mosques in Turkey, trains imams, and organizes religious courses for young people and adults during the summer holidays. The fact of the Directorate's mere presence in the state system as well as its provision of services only to Turkey's Muslim population raises questions about Turkey's status as a secular state and whether the Directorate's presence is compatible with secularism. Another issue in Turkey is the dominantly orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam, which informs the Directorate's main activities. This debate will continue in Turkey, whether or not the AK Party runs the government.

Religious Education

Compulsory religious education in primary and secondary schools, as required by the Constitution, is also a contested issue in Turkey. Until 1980 religious education was an elective course. In the 1982 Constitution, which was drafted after the 1980 military coup, instruction in religious culture and morality became compulsory for Muslim children regardless of their sectarian affiliation.[22] Non-Muslim children were, however, exempted from taking these courses. It is

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ironic to see that generals of the military coup, who were strictly committed to secular ideals and considered themselves guardians of the state, introduced compulsory religion education. Arguably the generals wanted to control the curriculum and observe religious inculcation closely instead of leaving it to independent religious groups or pushing religious education underground. Yet one might also argue that compulsory religious education was implemented to educate young people, as religion could play a unifying role following the period of political fragmentation that led to street fighting prior to the military coup. Turks generally approve compulsory education, excluding the Alevi community and liberal organizations. Yet when it comes to the nature of the curriculum and the content of the teaching material, a heated dispute emerges. Domestic and external factors, such as EU membership negotiations and decisions by the European Court of Human Rights, often lead to fierce debates and court cases, which resulted in amendments to the curriculum in 2008.[23]

Because the complete rejection of compulsory religious education is futile—because new regulations require a constitutional change, which is not possible in the current political configuration—the confessional content of the curricula became a target, especially for the Alevi community. The Alevis argue that the curriculum represents only Sunni Islam and does not incorporate any teachings of Alevi beliefs and doctrines.[24] They have challenged this policy as discrimination in the courts.[25] In fact about four thousand cases filed by members of the Alevi community are pending in the Turkish courts.[26] In an exemplary case, after the internal legal procedures had been exhausted, the parents of an Alevi student appealed to the European Court of Human Rights.[27] In October 2007 the Court ruled that the content of the curriculum dominantly represented Sunni Islam and urged the Turkish government to make necessary amendments to introduce a more diverse curriculum including the Alevi beliefs.[28] It is noteworthy that the Court did not rule against the compulsory status of religious education; rather its ruling pertained to the content of the course curriculum. The Court argued that Alevism is distinct from the Sunni interpretation of Islam and that the content of religious courses did not meet the European Convention on Human Rights criteria of objectivity and plurality.[29] Following this decision, the Ministry of National Education made several changes. Notably, in March 2009 a local court in Antalya, a southern city, ruled in favor of Alevi parents who demanded that their daughter be exempt from compulsory religious instruction.[30]

The Dress Code and the Headscarf Issue

There is no law that prohibits female students from wearing the headscarf in the universities, but there is a formal dress code that bans women veiling in public offices, such as in schools, hospitals, libraries, ministries, military establishments,

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and Parliament. Private companies such as banks, stores, shopping centers, restaurants, and large supermarkets predominantly follow a policy of banning the veil. Although empowerment of women through education and employment is frequently mentioned by state authorities and political parties, a significant number of women in Turkey face difficulties in accessing higher education and the job market because of the headscarf ban.

The headscarf ban at the universities started in the mid-1980s as a result of ad hoc decisions by some university administrators of not allowing veiled students to enter the university premises. When this practice was supported by the Council of State, the ruling Motherland Party passed a law (No. 3511) in 1988 to lift the ban. The first attempt to allow female students "to cover their hair and necks because of their religious convictions" was blocked by a Constitutional Court ruling in 1989.[31] The second attempt by the Motherland Party, which passed a law (No. 3670) to lift the ban in 1990 was again blocked by the Constitutional Court on April 9, 1991, on the application of the main opposition party.[32] Based on the rulings of the Constitutional Court, university administrators continued the headscarf ban. Those who supported the ban argued that it was in place to protect secular principles; its critics claimed that the ban was a violation of freedom of religion.

When the AK Party came to power in 2002, its leaders initially remained silent on the issue and didn't initiate a legal process to lift the ban. During the party's second term, with the support of the Nationalist Action Party, it pressed the Turkish Parliament to pass a constitutional amendment on February 9, 2008, by 411 to 103 votes, with the purpose of ending a long-running ban on Islamic headscarves at universities. On February 22 President Abdullah Gül approved the changes.

The changes to the Constitution were concerned with the principle of equality and the right to education by all; lifting the ban on headscarves was not explicitly mentioned in the law. Under heavy pressure from staunch secularist circles and the establishment, however, the Constitutional Court—described as "the stronghold of secularists"[33]—annulled the amendments that would lift the ban at the universities the same year. The court ruled on June 5, 2008, that the Turkish Parliament had violated the constitutionally enshrined principle of secularism by making amendments to lift the ban.[34] In particular the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (RPP), maintained that the AK Party had a secret agenda to Islamize the country, which is why the party made such changes.[35] However, with the leadership change in the RRP, there has been a move toward acknowledging the headscarf question in Turkey. In contrast to previous policies supporting the ban, Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu, the new leader of the RPP, claimed that his party could solve the problem. A commission was established by the RPP to prepare a report to seek alternative options to resolve Turkey's headscarf controversy;[36] its findings and recommendations are awaited.

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Kiliçdaroğlu's statement created an expectation but also caused in-party disputes about the RPP's traditional position toward secularism and religion. Although Kiliçdaroğlu offered no formula for the solution and took no initiative, he had to soften the tone of his promises based on "concerns" expressed by some RPP deputies.[37]

Debates on the headscarf focus largely on university students. However, it is likely that headscarf question will be discussed within a larger framework in the near future in a democratizing Turkey. Recent research indicates that the headscarf ban, or negative attitudes toward it, affect not only women in higher education but also women in the job market. The state does not employ women who wear a headscarf in public offices. The headscarf ban for working women has a chain effect, which is copied by the private sector. Veiled women face unfavorable treatment at the beginning of their employment, during work, and in the process of promotion.[38] Unless resolved by the participation of major political parties and actors, the headscarf ban will continue to be one of the main issues of controversy in Turkish politics and a polarizing question.

Unorthodox Muslims and Non-Muslim Communities

The Alevi Community

The Alevi community is the largest nonorthodox Muslim group in Turkey. "Although the meaning of Alevism is still disputed among the Alevi groups, their common claims revolve around public recognition of Alevi identity and institutions."[39] If we look at more specific demands, the following list covers most of the Alevi claims:

> Legalization of the status of cemevis as places of worship (ibadethane); Abolition of compulsory religious courses; abandonment of the policy of building mosques in Alevi villages; abolition of the Administration of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) or allocation of a budget to cemevis; recommendation of saz (lute) as a musical instrument in secondary school curriculum; handing over the administration and control of the historical Bektaşi shrines (dergahs) including the Hacı Bektaş Dergah, Şahkulu Dergah to Alevi-Bektaşi foundations and associations; removal of religion column from the national ID cards; broadcast of programs on Alevi culture and rituals at official TV and radio broadcasting company, TRT (Turkish Radio and Television); Positive discrimination for Alevi citizens in bureaucratic jobs; free water, electricity, and land for cemevis; financial compensation to Alevi dedes.[40]

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For the Alevi community there are signs of positive developments. First, the deputy head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs has publicly declared that his institution had neglected the Alevis.[41] After this public declaration, representatives of some Alevi organizations met with officials of the Directorate to discuss their views and air their expectations. It is important to note that the Alevi community is very diverse and its definition of Alevism, as well as its connection with Islam, differs considerably among Alevi groups.[42] Some Alevi groups claim that Alevism represents a liberal and progressive interpretation of Islam; some argue that it is marked by humanism; while other Alevi groups reject any Islamic connections and argue that Alevism is a worldview with its own philosophy and rituals.[43] These groups believe that the existence of the Directorate undermines secularism, and they therefore refuse to cooperate with it. Yet Alevi groups that see Alevism under the umbrella of Islam are engaging in a dialogue with the state and the Directorate in an attempt to get full recognition and equal representation.[44] The current government started, for the first time, direct engagement with the Alevi community. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed an Alevi member of Parliament from the AK Party as an envoy to bring both sides into a discussion.[45] Furthermore, in a gesture of recognition of Alevi claims, Prime Minister Erdoğan participated at dinners with the Alevi leaders, organized on ritually important days for the community.[46]

More recently the government initiated a special series of Alevi workshops to identify Alevi problems and claims and to prepare a road map to solutions.[47] As of this writing, seven workshops had been held in 2009 and 2010 under the auspices of Directorate of Religious Affairs. The first workshop brought together Alevi community leaders; the next five workshops invited intellectuals and opinion leaders from all backgrounds, including political scientists, historians, theologians, and representatives from civil society organizations and the media.[48] The final workshop brought together a mix of the participants in previous meetings to formulate recommendations to the government.[49]

Non-Muslims

Though reports indicate that over 98 percent of the population of Turkey is Muslim,[50] there are also several non-Muslim religious groups inherited from the Ottoman state, most of which are concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. Because census results do not contain any data on the religious affiliation of Turkish citizens, the exact membership figures of non-Muslim communities are not available.[51] The 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, which formally established the Republic of Turkey, recognizes the existence of religious minorities and makes specific references to guarantees and protections for all non-Muslim minorities.[52] Article 39 of the Treaty guarantees equality among Turkish citizens regardless of their religious conviction: "Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities

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will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems. All the inhabitants of Turkey, without distinction of religion, shall be equal before the law." Article 40 of the Lausanne Treaty stipulates that "Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein." Article 42 reaffirms that "[t]he Turkish Government undertakes to grant full protection to the churches, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious establishments of the above-mentioned minorities. All facilities and authorization will be granted to the pious foundations, and to the religious and charitable institutions of the said minorities at present existing in Turkey, and the Turkish Government will not refuse, for the formation of new religious and charitable institutions, any of the necessary facilities which are guaranteed to other private institutions of that nature." Despite these articles, however, non-Muslim minorities in Turkey have faced problems since 1936 regarding property ownership, renovation, and expansion of their places of worship and other institutions.

The Office of Foundations (Vakiflar Genel Müdürlüğü) regulates some activities of non-Muslim religious groups and their affiliated churches, monasteries, religious schools, and related property. There are 160 "minority foundations" recognized by the Office of Foundations,[53] including Greek Orthodox (approximately seventy sites), Armenian Orthodox (approximately fifty), and Jewish (twenty), as well as Syrian Christian, Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, and Maroni foundations. On January 2, 2003, Parliament amended the law pertaining to the property of community (non-Muslim minority) foundations, lifting strict restrictions and enabling these foundations to have more freedom in keeping, maintaining, and purchasing new premises.[54] Under the 2003 law, community foundations became eligible to purchase new property for religious, social, cultural, and educational functions, as well as for providing health services under more flexible conditions with the permission of the Foundations Directorate.[55] Parliament also voted in favor of a new Foundation Law on February 2008 that expands freedoms for minority foundations in Turkey, which was approved by President Gül.[56]

Turkey's policy toward its non-Muslims subjects is moving in the right direction in terms of consolidating and expanding rights and liberties they were not able to fully enjoy under Kemalism, which tended to favor a nationalist and exclusivist interpretation of secularism. The performance of the current Turkish government under the AK Party offers positive signs for the future. New legal provisions in 2003 have granted "places of worship" status to existing churches and synagogues, and a new Protestant church opened in 2006. Following these developments Parliament passed an amendment that enables churches and

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synagogues to have the same right as mosques to use free water and electricity.[57] However, the question of reopening the Halki Seminary, which was established on Heybeli Island in 1844 and closed down in 1971, still remains unresolved, though government ministers and politicians have made positive statements.

It should be noted that the Halki Seminary was not closed down on religious grounds, and there is no court decision specifically aiming at closing this institution. Closure of the Halki Seminary should be viewed in the context of state intervention and centralization of education in Turkey. When Turkey was founded as a nation-state, the education system was centralized through the Unification of Education Law (No. 789, March 3, 1924, Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu), which consolidated state control on all educational institutions in the name of establishing a single system for the inculcation of cultural conformity. Moreover in 1926 the Law Pertaining to Education Organization stipulated that "no school can be established without the permission of the state." These two laws formed the basis for direct state homogenization of institutions of education. A subsequent Constitutional Court decision in 1971 led to closure of private higher education institutions, including higher sections of Halki Seminary and the American Robert College.[58] The Court held the view that "Article 120 of the Constitution stipulates that higher education institutions can be established by the state only." With that decision, private higher education institutions faced two options: either become part of a state university by accepting its control and authority or close down their higher education sections. Robert College chose the first option and converted to a state university in 1971 under a new name, becoming a reputable and leading university in Turkey. The Halki Seminary did not accept the same option and therefore had to close down its higher education section.

Demands for the reopening of the Halki Seminary by the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey were met largely by silence by previous governments. Democratization moves by the AK Party government have involved consideration of the demands of the Greek Orthodox community. Although no concrete steps have been taken so far, moves toward democratization are indicated by the constitutional referendum on September 12, 2010, which changed twenty-six articles of the current Constitution. As noted earlier, the AK Party government initiated two major projects popularly known as the Kurdish Opening and the Alevi Opening. A further initiative for freedom of religion for all communities is expected to be undertaken by the AK Party government. AK Party leadership appears willing to expand religious liberty and lift bans for individual and institutional freedom. Following a meeting with his Greek counterpart, Yorgo Papandreu, Prime Minister Erdoğan said this: "A legal committee has been working on this issue. We hope to find a solution to the Halki Seminary question during our term in the government."[59]

There are two main obstacles preventing the AK Party government from taking radical steps to resolve religious freedom issues in the current political

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climate. The first is the perceived threat that the party would be banned if it takes on these issues. Charging that the AK Party was weakening the secular foundations of the state, the chief public prosecutor of the Court of Cassation opened a case in 2008 at the Constitutional Court to shut down the party and ban more than seventy politicians. Although the Court did not close the AK Party, the case has set the prosecutor's sword at the party's neck. The closure of twenty-six parties since 1954 largely on grounds of ethnic separatism or a focus of antisecular activities seems to have made the AK Party leadership more cautious and less willing to take any risks to avoid yet another closure case.[60]

The second reason seems to be concern for public opinion in the lead-up to general elections to be held in summer of 2011. Although the Directorate of Religious Affairs[61] and the Higher Education Council[62] see no problem with the opening of the Halki Seminary, public opinion seems to be divided; a recent survey reported that 28 percent of Turks support the opening, 41.5 percent are against it, and 31 percent are undecided.[63] The AK Party is not expected to take bold steps in case this might alienate some of its constituency. Moreover the AK Party government does not get any support from the main opposition party, the RPP, on eliminating limitations on religious liberty, particularly on the issue of reopening the Halki Seminary. If the RPP lends support to the AK Party to expand freedom of religion in Turkey, AK Party leadership will most probably feel more confident to take radical steps. The RPP seems to be undecided on resolving freedom of religion issues, which leaves the AK Party on its own and less willing to act, given the closure case it faced earlier and ambivalent public opinion. If the AK Party wins the 2011 elections with a clear majority, it is expected that concrete steps will be taken to resolve this question since the party leadership will have a consolidated mandate for the third term in office and feel less vulnerable in removing obstacles to religious liberty. The reopening the Halki Seminary will be one of the major test cases for Muslim democrats in Turkey.

Turkish Foreign Policy Orientation

Turkey's changing relations with the EU, the United States, Israel, Iran, and the Arab world are increasingly analyzed through the prism of identity shift, of a tilt toward the Middle East in general and the Muslim world in particular. Diverse international initiatives since 2002 have raised questions about the direction of Turkey's foreign policy. As the October 2010 cover page of *The Economist* asked, Is Turkey turning its back on the West?[64] This is a legitimate question given Turkey's relations with Iran and Syria, its rift with Israel over the Gaza issue, and strained relations aggravated by the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla crisis.

If one looks at Turkey's new foreign dynamism and its diverse directions from a Eurocentric or U.S.-centric position, one gets the impression that the republic

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is anchoring itself in the Muslim Middle East. This shortsighted view fails to capture the complexities and multidimensional nature of foreign policies pursued by a country stretching between East and West, neighboring Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia—a crisis-ridden and unstable region. From a realistic perspective, it is neither in the interest of Turkey nor in the interest of Europe and the United States to turn their back on this volatile region. Since coming to power, the AK Party has been pursuing a zero-problem policy with neighboring countries, leading to closer relations and better economic and security cooperation. As a result of the zero-problem policy, Turkey established close working relations with Syria, with which it was on the brink of war over Syria's hosting of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK terror organization.

Turkey's improved relations in the Middle East paid off well, to the extent that Turkey has played a mediating role between Israel and Syria, convinced various parties to take part in general elections in Iraq, facilitated Turkish business investments in northern Iraq, and bilaterally lifted visas with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Turkey's closer relations with the Arab world and its possible membership in the EU should be seen as strategic assets for the democratization of the region rather than as leaving the West. Turkey has established better relations not only with the Middle Eastern Muslim countries but also with Russia and Greece. Turkey and Russia bilaterally lifted visas, and Russia became the largest trade partner of Turkey. Moreover the AK Party tried to close the rift with Armenia, despite significant resistance from the opposition parties. All these developments require us to reconsider the Eurocentric or U.S.-centric perspective on Turkish foreign policy and acknowledge that Turkey's soft power has a potential to consolidate peace and stability in the region.

It is time to recognize that the cold war is over and foreign policy options are more diverse for countries like Turkey. The cold war framework was shaped predominantly by security concerns. The United States still seems to hold on to this view and expects its allies to pursue their foreign policy on this principle. However, this view is no longer compatible with the realities of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. New power centers have emerged, with different priorities and interests than those of the West, though not necessarily contradictory. India, China, Russia, and Brazil are described as emerging powers, a development that transforms the parameters of international relations. These emerging powers have economic growth, military strength, energy sources, and demographic capital. From this perspective, Turkey can be described as an emerging power in the region, with its hard and soft power. It should be remembered in this context that Turkey has the second largest military power in NATO after the United States. It is the seventeenth largest economy globally and the fifth in Europe. As far as the region is concerned, Turkey also has deep cultural relations as well as an increasing trade volume where it can capitalize on soft power to pursue a constructive and stabilizing role, especially in Iraq and

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Afghanistan, major areas of concern for the United States and Europe. As pointed out by a longtime observer of Turkey, the AK Party's foreign "policies remain essentially nationalist, Turkey-centered and commercially opportunistic; it is a misconception to think of them as Islamist, or even ideological. Whatever the country's problems, Turkey's primary principal relationships remain those with Europe and the United States."[65] Turkey's record-breaking increase in trade with neighboring countries and its attraction of significant foreign investment from the Middle East and Europe confirm that the AK Party is driven by rational and pragmatic concerns, not ideological motives.[66]

The end of the cold war ushered in several "changes in geopolitics, economy, energy, and human mobility in Turkey's neighborhood and have presented the country with complex challenges, as well as opportunities. In response, over the last decade Turkey has defined a new foreign policy doctrine."[67] The new dynamism in Turkish engagement in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus and its closer relations with Muslim countries should be viewed in the context of post–cold war realities and opportunities as well as requirements to adapt and respond to the new challenges.

Conclusions

Turkey's state system is strongly secular, though it is a Muslim-majority country by population. There is a strict wall of separation between the state and religion. Therefore religion, religious institutions, and religious groups have no influence on legislation, which is solely based on secular procedures. Religion is not a source of law in the country, which aspires to become a full member of the European Union. To achieve this objective, Turkey has introduced several harmonization packages to bring its legal system in line with that of the EU. These reforms positively contributed to expand freedom of religion both for the majority Muslim population and nonorthodox communities and non-Muslim minorities.

The rise of the AK Party in 2002 was a source of concern for the secular elite, including the military, judiciary, high-level bureaucracy, and the main opposition Republican People's Party, which feared that the AK Party would undermine democracy, destroy the secular foundations of the republic, and establish an Islamic state. The AK Party is governing Turkey for a third term after winning the 2011 elections. Records of the AK Party policies since 2002 and research findings, as analyzed in this chapter, demonstrate that these fears and suspicions are not persuasive. In fact the AK Party initiated a "silent revolution";[68] "instead of undermining democracy, it ha[s] done more to widen civil liberties than any preceding government since 1960s."[69] The political attitude of the current AK Party government has also paved the way for the emergence of more progressive and libertarian views, with the objective of lifting prohibitions on religion and

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establishing liberties and legal entitlements for religious communities. As the September 12, 2010, constitutional referendum indicates (58 percent approved), there is an expectation for further democratization, liberalization, and transparency in the changing domestic and foreign policy environment in Turkey.

Despite promising developments in reconciling with the universal standards of freedom of religion and granting rights to believers of all kinds, there are still issues that need to be addressed by the AK Party. Two of these issues are lifting the headscarf ban for university students and allowing formal religious education for children at an early age rather than waiting until they finish eight years (average age fifteen) of compulsory primary education.[70] Moreover the headscarf ban for staff in public offices should be lifted since it prevents veiled women from entering the public workforce and makes them vulnerable citizens. A system granting legal personality to both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim minority religious groups is still waiting to be addressed. As the Venice Commission notes, the Turkish legal system does not have any instrument whereby "religious communities can register and obtain legal personality."[71] Additionally the government should endeavor to meet some of the demands of Alevi communities on the basis of consensus and common understanding. Open discussions on the question of the Halki Seminary should take place, and the Greek Orthodox community should be engaged in the debate. The AK Party took courageous steps to resolve the Kurdish question, first recognizing the presence of such a question and then introducing a Kurdish TV channel. It should take similar bold steps for the opening of the Halki Seminary and should also reach out to the Armenian Orthodox community to resolve their claim to equal citizenship.

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