

**RE-SOCIALIZING RELIGION:
ISLAM AND THE NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT IN TURKEY**

This article discusses religion in Turkey within the context of recent domestic and international developments. The main argument is the inapplicability of the Cold War perceptions on religion in Turkey. Accordingly, different political groups and movements have been in search of a new definition for the role of Islam in domestic politics. After comparing the Cold War and post-Cold War paradigms on religion, the article ends up with the special case of the Turkish left with a special reference to religion.

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Turkey Recognizes the Post Cold War System

The end of the Cold War paved the way for unprecedented developments around the globe. The effects of the fall of the Soviet Union were not experienced similarly or simultaneously in all places. In other words, there was a delay in many non-Western states, and accordingly several states are still acting on a Cold War mentality. Thus, it is logically reliable to categorize states according to their unique experience in terms of entering the post-Cold War era. For example, many third world states resisted the great changes that the end of Cold War introduced, in contrast to the rapid changes undertaken by ex-Soviet Bloc Western states. For the non-Western states, the developments that came out by the end of the Cold War threatened their political systems. While the Cold War system helped them protect non-democratic regimes, the post-Cold War era truly transformed the nature of international system into one that threatens autocracies. The rise of concepts such as human rights, democracy, market economy and humanitarian intervention have given way to a new international system in which Cold War distinctions between domestic and international politics are weakened. The post Cold War system does not allow states to read the system based on its domestic ideology. Consequently, the post Cold War system can be summarized as the rise of *international* against existing domestic ideologies. As I stated above, different states felt the effects of the Cold War at a different time. Two facts are instructive in explaining this timing discrepancy. First, the level of relationship between state and system: The more dependence on the international system, the more rapid adaptation to the post-Cold War realities. Second, the domestic parameters: Despite the conservative nature of third world states, the dynamic nature of domestic parameters forced many states to recognize global wide developments.

Turkey, like many developing states, did not quickly recognize this system wide transformation. Instead, the decision-making elites insisted on following the Cold War mentality. In spite of this old-fashioned firmness, Turkey has finally faced the necessity of entering into post-Cold War era. Why? The answer is very clear, for both aforementioned conditions exist in Turkey. Turkey, thanks to its geopolitical position, continues to have a critical relationship with the international system. In other words, Turkey cannot “rescue” itself from the system. The unique contribution of international actors such as the EU and the US confirms this critical relationship. On the other hand, Turkey has also a very dynamic domestic structure. Unlike many other Islamic states, Turkey has a dynamic civil society with all types of political tendencies. Besides, the multi-ethnic structure of society contributes to the dynamism of the political life. In sum, the traditional Cold War rationality has been blocked between people and the international system. Therefore, both domestic and international dynamics force Turkey to adapt herself to the post-Cold War realities. In my opinion, despite the different resistances, Turkey has finished its entrance into the post-Cold War era with the recent diplomatic process over Cyprus. Indeed, the Cyprus problem has proven to be a great obstacle in the way of Turkey’s attachment to post-Cold War realities. The Cyprus problem has isolated Turkey from the system. Turkey’s recent willingness to solve the problem is an important indicator that this country is recognizing the post-Cold War world. Consequently, Turkey finally recognized the post-Cold War system both at domestic and international level. Recent reformist agendas carried out by successive Turkish governments are important clues that exhibit the recognition of the post-Cold War conditions by Turkey.

Re-defining Islam

The beginning of post-Cold War era also transformed the meaning of religion in Turkey, both in domestic and international contexts, necessitating the re-definition of religion in Turkish political lexicon. In domestic politics, an equally important development is the paradigm shift experienced by the Islamists. It would not be an exaggeration to claim it has been they who earliest recognized the transformation of the international system. Their understanding of Islam according to the Cold War realities was quickly cleaned out. As is known, Islam was understood as a state ideology during the Cold War. Inspired by several developments such as the Iranian Revolution, many Islamists had believed that Islam was a political system. In the same way, Islamists were extremely skeptical about the West and its values of democracy and human rights. In a typical Khomeinian discourse, they had damned West, democracy, liberal values, and market principles.

The important development that forced Islamists to redefine their ideas was the Turkey's relations with the EU. Why curse the EU when it supports democratization? Rescued from their Cold War obsessions, the Turkish Islamists found the opportunity of analyzing the West and the Western culture at a more liberal level. They finally noticed that the EU dimension might be one of their most important leverages in protecting their position in Turkish politics. However, it should be mentioned that the Islamists' transformation is beyond several simple pragmatic steps. They gradually internalized this pragmatic approach.

In this context, the so-called 28 February Process was also instructive.¹ Not only for Islamists but also for the other sectors of society, the 28 February Process confirmed that Turkey could no longer follow the Cold War assumptions. To begin with, the Islamists understood that they had to give up their traditional ideological agendas such as Islamic law and economy. Such traditional revolutionary ideas appeared inapplicable given the historical and cultural nature of Turkish society. In the same way, other groups, including the so-called *establishment*, understood that democracy could be the only valid social contract in country like Turkey. Consequently, the 28 February Process constructed a new social understanding of religion in Turkey.

International System and Islam

Another very important development is the rise of system-level significance of Islam. The end of the Cold War created serious problems for world actors including chief institutions such as NATO and UN. New types of "enemies" such as terrorism, AIDS and drug trafficking necessitated a new concept of security and defense. Of all, radical Islamists such as Al-Qaeda are the most aggressive enemies of the new international system. Several terrorist attacks like those that took place in New York and Istanbul have necessitated a system-level reconsideration of Islamic world. The anti-democratic nature of many Islamic states became a

¹ What is meant here by the 28 February Process is the recent tension between Turkish military (and bureaucracy) and the Necmettin Erbakan led government. Due to the religious tendencies of Erbakan's government, the military and bureaucratic circles aimed to protect the secular-Kemalist nature of the regime. Though it was not a typical coup like the previous ones, the government resigned after several important developments. See: Bacik, Gokhan (2003) 'The Transformation of Muslim Self and the Emergence of a New Discourse on Europe: the Turkish Case', *International Review of Sociology* 13 (1): 21-38.

terrorist producing mechanism. The legitimacy problem creates a mass alienation trauma in Muslim people in different Middle Eastern states, which inevitably radicalizes masses against the West. When millions of people are oppressed given their religion, ethnicity, or their demands for human rights, they are bound to become radicalized. Political systems in Islamic countries have not created the necessary democratic institutions such as domestic opposition groups to vent this anger. Millions of people are trapped in strict and unfair systems. Radicalism has become the number one problem from Algeria to Pakistan. Muslims have faced the well-known problem of *alienation*. It is a fact that, without correcting the poor democratic record of Muslim states, a global level solution for terrorism seems difficult.

This simple equation increases the importance of moderate Islamists in Muslim states. Cooperating with elected moderate Islamists in Muslim states also may help the international community in the war against terrorism. It should be noted that elected governments with moderate Islamic affiliations would be able to aid Western countries in their struggle against global problems.

Turkey is important. Given the cited problematic position of the Muslim world in terms of democracy and remembering the transformation of Turkish Islamists, the Turkish case may play a constructive role in the global war against terrorism. No doubt, democratically elected moderate Islamists has a potential position. The Western states absolutely need a model country in which the compatibility of Islamic values and democratic values is demonstrated. However, the well-known “Turkish model” discourse needs more work. In this vein, grand social integration projects such as Turkey’s membership in the European Union (EU) should be realized. Turkey’s significance at international level produces important chance for the Islamists in presenting their capacity in adapting themselves to global values. Thus, the long-term success of such groups depends on their ability in adapting themselves according to the contemporary values.

Islam and the Turkish Left

There has always been a problematic relationship between Islam and the Turkish left. Except for certain occasions, the conservative groups of Turkish society have usually supported center and center-right parties. Theoretically speaking, Turkey has all potential in fostering a strong social democratic party. However, the crisis of the left in Turkey underlines a language problem between conservative people and the left elites. The Turkish left needs a new language to rejuvenate its image among the conservative sectors of society. First, the Turkish left should abandon its extreme nationalist stance. Despite the European sample, the Turkish left has kept its excessive nationalist characteristics. The current problems of the Turkish left are best felt at social and economic issue such as human rights and privatization. It could be understandable during the Cold War era, but for now a nationalist social democratic identity is incongruent with most Western values. A social democratic party like the European counterparts will definitely seize the attention of mass conservative people deprived of social and economic welfare. Second, the left should re-construct its understanding of Islam. Islam is an essential part of the Turkish culture. Thus, independent of several Islamists’ agendas, Islam has played an important role in Turkey. A new Turkish left which supports the consolidation of fundamental human rights will directly encompass the conservative groups as well. It should be remembered that the legacy of Islam and the legacy of the Enlightenment can be reconciled. The EU project and its values can be synthesized with the traditional Islamic values. This would be also an important success for global peace. A new leftist discourse in Turkey can and must play an essential role in this process.

Conclusion

The social contract created by the founding fathers of the Turkish Republic brought Turkey into the modern world. Now, the needed step is the synthesis between this social contract and global values. All domestic actors' long-term success depends on their capacity to understand the necessity of the cited new synthesis. Inevitably, Islam will play an important role in the process of creating a new synthesis between Turkish and contemporary values. The oft-cited Turkish model lies with the relative success of the Turkish Republic in merging both Islamic and Western values. Thus, the demise of all Cold War opinions among both leftists and conservatives is a must step in this process. Historically speaking, both pro-Islamic and anti-Islamic groups had been using extreme and radical paradigms on religion during the Cold War. That was normal in the Cold War atmosphere, but today further insistence on old Cold War opinions will paralyze the process and in turn radicalize such groups.