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Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement

Berna Turam

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The relationship between Islam and the state in Turkey has been the subject of a great interest among the students of Turkish politics and Islam. A new study, based on a multi-sited ethnography by Berna Turam of Hampshire College, provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of the transformation of Islam(ism) in Turkey. As Turam points out in the introduction, the book is the story of “a rising agreement, cooperation and a growing sense of belonging between the secular state and Islamic actors” (p. 7). This agreement emanates from the shifting dynamics between Islamic ways of life and the conduct of the state. By studying the cases of the Fethullah Gülen Movement and the AKP, the book demonstrates how Islamic actors and the state have transformed one another in the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium through “the dynamics of the shifting relationship between the Turkish Islamic actors and the secular state from confrontation to cooperation.” The book goes on to explore “the sources, nature, outcomes of emergent *engagements* between Islam and the state.” The politics of engagement fruitfully recognize “the emergence of alternative vertical channels, which link rather than divide or antagonize Islamic actors and the state.” Turam argues that these alternative linkages “preceded and facilitated institutional reform as well as the consolidation of liberal democracy in Turkey” (p. 31). The book also aptly shows that the said transformation has not been limited only to Turkish Islamic actors, for, there is “an increasing number of secular Turkish citizens who have been developing more accepting and even sympathetic attitudes towards Turkish Islamic actors” (p. 4 and 6). Turning her attention to “the parallel transformations of Islamism and Atatürkism,” Turam is able to unearth the previously unnoticed “mutually changing” views of Islamic and secular actors (p. 10). In this sense, this book focuses on the idea of “unintended interaction” between the state and Islam in Turkey while challenging “the myths of clash” between these two. Although it promises to focus on the idea of interaction between the state and Islamic actors, Turam underestimates the intended character of the interaction on the side of the actors and structures. In other words, how Islamic actors and the secular forces interact is determined by the deliberate and calculated preferences of the actors and by international influences as well. For example, it is clear that most of the Islamic actors support Turkey’s EU membership due to the fact that membership

will bring a liberal democratic political environment in which their demands can be met.

In fact, the notion of engagement provides fertile ground for discrediting both orientalist and neo-orientalist arguments about the relationship between Islam and the state. Turam's usage of the notion of *politics of engagement* is a particularly productive move away from the binary categorization, i.e. the Islamization of the state or the defeat of Islamism by secularism. Thus, both the "oppression prophecy (the Turkish state was so inherently authoritarian and illiberal that it was doomed to repress and eventually obliterate Islamic movements; strong state and weak society) and threat prophecy (Islamic groups were so powerful that they would gradually penetrate political institutions and the undermine the Republican project in order to conquer the secular state; strong society weak state)" (pp. 7-8) are not useful in understanding this shifting and interactive relationship. Despite this interactive relationship, the tensions between Islamic actors (the AKP and the Gülen Movement) and the secularist establishment can lead to confrontation, at least to controlled crises; it only developed into an open power struggle around the issue of presidential elections in 2007.

Turam finds "an organic continuity" between the Gülen Movement and the AKP, differentiating them from other Islam-oriented groups and parties. She argues that both have displayed similar cooperative attitudes, as opposed to confrontational ones, towards the secular Turkish Republic. Here, Turam seems to underestimate some other cooperative and interactive Islamic political manifestations in Turkey. Indeed, the AKP's "new politics" should be seen as the culmination of transformations not only in the Gülen Movement but also in the various Islamic sectors in Turkey, from other religious orders and communities to intellectuals and Anatolian entrepreneurs. It should also be remembered that the Hak-İş Labour Confederation is an Islamic labour union that has transformed its Islamist unionism from being an alternative to both capitalism and socialism into democratic unionism, due to the need to address large-scale secular, economic and social issues. So, this union can also easily be considered to be a forerunner of the AKP's cooperative and interactive "new" political stance.

The work by Turam contains an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the Gülen Movement and the AKP as the Islamic actors of engagement and differentiates them from other Islamic actors on the basis of their conflict-avoiding attitudes towards the secular state. Both the Gülen Movement and the AKP advocate economic liberalism and have extensive and efficient networking. Moreover, according to Turam, these new Islamic actors, by associating themselves with the nation, "probably felt more like the children

of a secular nation-state than their Muslim forefathers had in the early period of the Turkish Republic” (p. 22).

On the issue of these new Islamic actors’ contribution to democracy and civil society, Turam claims that both the Gülen Movement and the AKP have facilitated democratization not deliberately but accidentally. In other words, “the *planned* short-term projects of Islamization have been superseded by their *unintended* long term outcomes of engagements with the secular state.” (p. 26). This argument can be linked to her observation that the public sites and projects of the Gülen Movement and the AKP act as forces of democratization through their emphasis on pluralism, reform and tolerance, while their adherence to pious uniformity and rigid morality in private/domestic sites contradict their pro-democratic and pluralist discourses (p. 27). Turam further argues that “the success of Turkish Islamic actors lies in their potential capacity to reconcile these explicit tensions, not only between the public and private spheres but also between the state and Islam” (p. 27).

In the second chapter, Turam argues that “the long-lived fear of secularists has been that Islamists would demolish the boundaries that separate the state and the mosque. In fact, Turkish Islamic actors have readily compartmentalized public and private faces of Islam in pragmatic but creative ways” (p. 38). In particular, the Gülen Movement engineers “window sites” (*vitrin*) in the public realm. These window sites are the movement’s numerous public events inside and outside of Turkey that exhibit “its civic goals, pro-democratic undertakings” and provide “platforms for dialogue with both the Turkish state and the West.” Turam draws attention to the unintended outcomes of these public activities by stating that they have contributed to “the proliferation of civil society, not just by purposely creating horizontal networks and civic projects but also by unintentionally creating vertical ties to the state” (p. 57-59). Having discovered different levels of front and back stages in the Gülen movement, Turam suggests that the private realm of domestic and communal life (the back stage) mobilizes extensive faith-based undertakings and moral ways of life (p. 60). Interestingly, Turam finds that the increasing freedom of mobility for Islamic actors between private, public and political realms leads to an emerging self-questioning. In her opinion, this self-questioning is clearly an “indicator of micro-transformations of Islamic ways of life, along with broader socio-political transformations in Turkey” (p. 64). More importantly, this compartmentalization of Islamic ways of life not only provides autonomy for Islamic actors, but also contributes to an alternative secularization of Islam and democratization in Turkey, although in an unplanned way (pp. 64-65, 68).

Chapter 4 focuses on the interplay between Islam and secular nationalism outside the Turkish borders. The Gülen movement's ethnic politics in Central Asia demonstrate "not only the success of secular nationalism, but also the alignment between Islamic and secular nationalisms" (p. 103). In fact, the alignment between Islamic and secular nationalism is not something new in Turkish Islam, although it has attained a different form in the case of the Gülen Movement. Although Islam, as a set of legitimizing values for politics and state, has been abandoned in the course of the modernizing models of Islamic countries, it has always been employed in the service of different nationalisms as well. Islamic movements have often been influenced by the tradition and practice of the secular nationalisms of the nation-states. In Turkey, Islamic actors have often been sympathetic to Turkish nationalism, as can be seen in Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's ideas and even in the Refah Party's ideology of Milli Görüş. On the issue of the relationship between Islam and liberal democracy, Turam's findings confirm the idea that this relationship is contingent upon historical and contemporary conditions (p. 107). It seems true to say that Islamic political thought provides enough material for both authoritarian closures and democratic openings, depending on the nature of the specific political culture, socio-economic factors and attitudes of both the Islamic and secular elite. Political expressions of Islamic demands are contingent to and socially and culturally constructed through processes of interaction that are closely tied to all Islamic organizations.

Chapter 5 discusses an interesting cooperative engagement between Islam and the Republic: locating the public visibility of women is at the heart of the agenda. Turam finds that similar to the early Republican project, the Gülen Movement and the AKP leave "the gender regimes in the hands of the male engineers of Islamizing projects" (p. 131). Interestingly, although Islamic men discriminate against women by keeping them outside of the politics of engagement and power structures, Turam argues that the cooperation of Islamic and secular men in undertaking reforms is more likely to be favourable for Islamic women in the long run. This will result from "the unintended consequences of engagements with the state" (p. 132).

Chapter 6 illustrates how the politics of engagement have become a pivotal force in the transformation of Turkey into a liberal democracy. Turam argues that the secular state and moderate Islamic social forces have recently reached a selective agreement on a few basic principles of the Republic" (pp. 136-137). Albeit partial, this agreement is the key to the flourishing of liberal democracy. As the author points out, here it is significant that "the game rules have been

transformed more effectively by the non-resistant and non-confrontational social actors than the previous confrontational ones” (p. 150.)

Overall, Turam’s book successfully conveys the complexity of the dynamics between the state and Islamic groups: She contends that it would not be correct to explain the Turkish case with either the unique characteristics of Islamists in Turkey or with Atatürk’s heritage of authoritarian modernization. The author argues that, unlike cases of the co-option and authoritarian integration of Islam in Middle Eastern countries, the source of change in the relationship between Islam and the state in Turkey is the shifting linkages between them, “shifts that have motivated both sides to revise and readapt their attitudes and responses towards each other” (p. 154). The sporadic disagreements between Islamic actors and the state must be seen as potentially valuable assets to liberal democracy in Turkey.

Certainly, every book contains some factual mistakes and this book is no exception. Erbakan’s “ban from politics” occurred on 22 February 1998, not 1996 (p. 48). The date given for the “victory of the Refah party in national elections in 1996” should be corrected to 1995 (p. 49.) All in all, this book can be highly recommended to students of Islam who wish to escape from the neo-orientalist flaws of literature on Islam.

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Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-1958

David Kenneth Fieldhouse

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“There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at disposal of one or another Western power.”²¹ This is how Edward Said summarized, in its simplest form, the Western perception of the Middle East after the end of World War I. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1917 started a new era in the history of the Middle East, totally changing the borders, authority and the ethnic

21 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (England: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 36.