

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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Political Identity and Human Rights in Turkey

Islamic Identity and the West: Is Conflict Inevitable?

Ihsan D. Dağı

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Islamic Identity and the West: Is Conflict Inevitable?

Ihsan D. Dağı

Bridge over the Bosphorus in Istanbul connecting Europe and Asia

The September 11 attacks and ensuing American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced the view that Islam and the West are bound to conflict. However popular this view is among some westerners and Muslims, a contrary development has taken place in Turkey, where Islamic political identity used to be shaped by an opposition to both the West and westernization policies of the Republic. In a unique way, the main body of Turkish Islamists have departed, in recent years, from their conventional anti-westernization position and engaged in a process of “rethinking” the West, westernization and modern/western political values. The changing language of Turkish Islamists presents an important move not only for the spread of modern political values among the Islamic groups in Turkey, but also for a possibility of rapprochement between Islam and the West in the post-September 11 context. The rethinking has been reflected in the identity formation and policy orientation of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), established in 2001 by a group of pro-Islamic politicians, which came to

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power in 2002 with a landslide victory. The JDP leadership—by launching an aggressive diplomacy abroad and reformist political strategy at home in order to meet the criteria set by the European Union (EU) for full membership—has demonstrated its departure from an anti-Western Islamic stand. This essay attempts to explain the reasons and outcomes of the transformation of Islamic political identity in Turkey with a view that questions the

arguments, widespread both in the West and the Islamic world, for the inevitability of conflict between Islam and the West.

The roots of Turkey's Islamic identity

The last two hundred years of Turkey is all about the history of westernization. When the state fell into decline vis-à-vis the rising European power, the late Ottomans embarked on a process of adopting “western” ways beginning with the westernization of the army, followed by the administration, and eventually into more domestic areas affecting the daily lives of the people.¹ Westernization as a concept and program to “renew” the state and society, in effect, became an identity-constituting orientation.²

Western pressures coupled with the policies of westernization as initiated by state elite prompted an Islamic response.³ After all by the 19th century, the West had penetrated into the Islamic lands politically, militarily and economically. Thus the question of how to stop the advancement of the West was a practical and political issue. In response the West was described as the source of all problems encountered by Muslims; it was evil, degenerating and destroying Islamic civilization. In short, the West was conceived as the absolute ‘other,’ generating identity debates to which the Islamic thinking had to respond.

However, it was not only the West itself but the wider question of how to respond to the West that raised identity debates. Western civilization was adopted in the Ottoman lands at least since 1839 as a means of catching up and coping with the West. The westernization process and policies, especially with the establishment of the secular Republic in 1923, resulted in the exclusion of Islamic leaders, groups and thought from the centers of the power, eliminating appearances of Islam in the public sphere. In the process of westernization and secularization during the early years of the republican era, the caliphate was abolished, religious orders and institutions were closed down, western civil law was adopted, religious schools and education were banned. No doubt the Kemalist reforms beginning in the 1930s intended to secularize the state marginalized Islam and Islamic groups, and presented a break with the past that was heavily blended with Islam and its social authority. Westernization presuming the possibility of a civilizational shift was, for the Islamists, a rejection of Islam in the renovation of Turkish

state. In short, westernization meant the use of the (modernized) state apparatus to suppress the roles of Islam in social and political realms.

For the Islamists, therefore, the republican reforms made it clear that it was not the West *per se* but the westernizers and the westernization program that swept them away from the centers of political and social order, and left them excluded.⁴

Despite the historical references to the “clash of the cross and crescent,” opposition to the radical secularization policies of the westernizers in the republican Turkey played a central role in the construction of an Islamic political identity.⁵



Islamic political identity in modern Turkey and the West

Under the single party regime and a strict policy of secularization, an Islamically motivated political movement did not appear until 1950s. Multi-party politics in the 1950s and 1960s enabled Islamic groups to start to express themselves in political processes, but this time within the center-right/conservative Democrat Party and the Justice Party. In the process of restructuring Turkish politics following the 1960 military intervention, Islam's political appeal increased. Its first outright political expression was the emergence of the National View Movement (NVM) under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan in 1970. The National Salvation Party (NSP), formed by Erbakan with an Islamic orientation, played a key role in the fragmented Turkish politics of 1970 holding around 10 percent popular support.⁶

Issues related to the West and westernization served as a catalyst for the National View Movement's identity formation, public discourse and policies.⁷ It differentiated itself from other political movements by taking a critical stand on the westernization of Turkey. The actors, institutions, processes and objectives of westernization were questioned in the name of authenticity, i.e. Islamic civilization, and in the search for power vis-à-vis the West. The NVM leadership believed that westernization was understood by the early republican leaders as a denial of the traditional (read Islamic) values, attitudes and institutions. The impact of westernization on the character of the state and society, traditionally influenced by Islam, was regarded as a more serious problem than that of the West itself. They regarded the attempt to replace Islamic-Ottoman civilization with a western one as the source of the ills of Turkish society. Thus, not only was western domination in Turkey to be eliminated to build a “national order,” but also westernization. Erbakan thus proclaimed before the 1995 general elections that once they came to power, they would put an end to the process of westernization.⁸

They believed that historically, culturally and geographically Turkey did not belong to the West, instead it shared its past, values and institutions with the Islamic world—



a world that had to be mobilized to balance the power and pressure of the West.⁹ For the NVM, it was westernization policies that resulted in the abandonment of the Islamic world and laid the

ground for Turkey to be an all-season ally of the West. The identity, discourse and policy suggestions of the NVM were shaped by its anti-Western stand.

Persistent efforts of the NVM and fragmentation of Turkish politics coupled with deep social and economic problems in the 1990s brought the pro-Islamic Welfare Party (re-named in 1984 after the military regime of 1980–1983) to the forefront of Turkish politics. In the 1995 elections the WP came first holding 21 percent of the votes. After a short-lived coalition government of center-right political parties, Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the WP, formed a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party. For the first time in the republican history of Turkey, a pro-Islamic political party came to power as a major force, holding a prime ministerial position.¹⁰ This was hard to digest for many, particularly among the traditional state elite including the military.

Search for survival and rapprochement with the West

As a result, the Welfare Party's unexpected success in the 1995 general elections provoked reactions from secularist/Kemalist centers. A "National Policy Paper" prepared by the National Security Council (NSC) described the "reactionary forces" of Islam as the first priority threat to the Turkish state, more dangerous and immediate than the secessionist Kurdish nationalism.¹¹ The army, aligning with some sectors of civil society, justified by their concern for the future of secularism in the face of the Islamist challenge, launched a campaign against the WP and in effect against the government. Soon after the formation of the Erbakan-led government, the National Security Council, meeting on February 28, 1997, took a number of decisions to "reinforce the secular character of the Turkish state" threatened by the Islamists.¹² As a result of the so-called February 28 process, described by some as a post-modern coup, the government was forced to step down. Yet it did not only aim at the political agents of Islamic movements. In the process, "Islamic capital" was displayed, boycotted and prosecuted to eliminate financial sources for Islamic movements. Islamic non-governmental organizations and foundations were also put under strict control. The popular mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was prosecuted and imprisoned for inciting hatred among people on religious grounds via a speech he made in Siirt in 1998 in which he read a poem written by Ziya Gökalp, a pan-Turkish sociologist and ideologue of the new republic. In sum, as a result of the February 28 process, the discursive hegemony of Kemalism was reasserted, while Islam's social and economic bases, as well as its political agents, were targeted, resulting in the closure of the WP by the Constitutional Court in 1998 on the grounds that it had become the center of anti-secularist activities.

With the closure of the WP, its parliamentary group joined the Virtue Party (VP), which had been formed by close associates of Erbakan. Yet the anti-westernism of the

old days had gone. The party seemed to have abandoned not only its opposition to the West, but also to have adopted western political values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law as part of its new discourse. Calls for democracy, human rights and the rule of law became the new characteristics of NVM's political strategy after its party was closed down and its leader banned from politics.

In this new language, modern/western values and the West itself as represented by the VP were no more anathema to Islamic political identity. This was symbolized in an ironic way by the decision of Erdogan to take the case of the WP closure and his ban from politics for five years to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

It seemed that the VP sought refuge not only in the West and western institutions like ECHR, but also in the discourse of modern/western values like democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In a parallel move, the NVM's stand on the EU also changed, advocating strongly Turkey's integration into the EU in contrast to its former view of the EU as a Christian club.¹³

The Justice and Development Party: Limits of Islamism in the age of globalization

When the Virtue Party was closed down in 2001 (again by the Constitutional Court on the same grounds of being a center of anti-secular activities), former mayor of Istanbul Tayyip Erdogan formed a new political party, the Justice and Development Party, with the support of those who were unhappy with the leadership and the discourse of old party. They immediately disassociated themselves from the old leadership and ideology. The JDP won the 2002 elections, receiving 34 percent of the votes whereas its nearest contender—the Republican People's Party—had 19 percent, and the pro-Islamic Felicity Party, still representing the old line of the NVM, received an all-time low of 2.5 percent.¹⁴

The JDP's organizational network and leadership were to a large extent inherited from the WP and VP. Initially they claimed to form a political party that would go beyond the WP/VP in an attempt to appeal to a wider public, in other words to the “political center.”¹⁵ The leadership referred to the Democrat Party of the 1950s, the Justice Party of the 1960s and the Motherland Party of the 1980s—all mass political movements from the center right that gained majority rule in their respective periods—as their political predecessors.¹⁶

The JDP leadership seemed to have departed not only from the leadership of the NVM but also from its ideology claiming that the party stands for “democratic conservatism.”¹⁷ The party program of the JDP, named the “Democracy and Development Program,” reflected the priorities of the new movement. While the emphasis on development has always been the legacy of center right politics since 1950, “democracy” was a new element regarded as convenient in relieving the excessive pressure of the judiciary and the military as exemplified in the February 28 process.

Given the pro-Islamic background of its leaders and the newly adapted notion of conservatism, the JDP can best be regarded as a post-Islamist movement; keeping its ties with Islam in the social realm but abandoning it as a political program. Witnessing how Islam's social base, with its educational, commercial and solidarity networks, was disrupted



by the politicization of Islam in the 1990s, they became more interested in keeping Islam's social and economic base intact as the basis of the "conservatism" Erdogan refers to.¹⁸ In the party program and the election declaration, the leadership acknowledged the end of ideologies including Islamism in the age of globalization.¹⁹

The JDP's position on EU membership and globalization differs significantly from any conventional Islamist stand. EU membership is regarded as a natural outcome of Turkey's modernization; "meeting the Copenhagen political criteria is an important step forward for the modernization of the country."²⁰ Right after the November 2002 elections, JDP leader Erdogan declared that the government's priority was not to resolve the "headscarf" issue, as would be expected from a pro-Islamic party, but instead to speed up the process to get Turkey into the EU, once called "the Christian Club" by the National View movement.²¹ Since its formation, the JDP government has introduced fundamental reforms on the Kurdish issue, human rights and civil-military relations

and furthermore made politically risky compromises to resolve the long-standing Cyprus dispute. By desperately seeking the EU membership, the JDP leadership, with its pro-Islamic background, must have explicitly abandoned the idea of an Islamic government in Turkey, as EU membership process practically eliminates such a possibility.²² It is also unusual to think of an Islamist party approving a globalization process that is believed by many to weaken the "local/national values" and thus erode traditional society—the natural social base for an Islamist movement. An Islamist movement, on the contrary, is fed by the fears of globalization prevalent among the traditional sectors. Rather than leaning toward local and nationalistic reactions, the JDP takes a pro-globalization stand. Anti-globalist tendencies in the party have been overtaken by an analysis that places Turkey not in isolation, but in integration with the external world as a precondition for further democratization, which is expected to open up a broader space for the survival and legitimacy of the party. By continuing the previously accepted IMF program, and by an aggressive privatization policy, the JDP reaffirms its pro-globalization stand.²³ Against opposition to the influx of foreign capital investment in Turkey buying privatized companies or forming partnerships with Turkish companies, Erdogan went public accusing the opponents of foreign capital of being "racist toward foreign capital."²⁴

Rethinking the West

As explained, Islamic political identity was traditionally built in opposition to the West, western values and, equally important, to the history of westernization in Turkey. Yet pro-Islamic politicians of the late 1990s, most of whom joined the JDP, realized that

they needed the West and modern/western values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in order to build a broader front against the Kemalist center, and to acquire legitimacy through this new discourse in their confrontation with the radical secularist establishment.

In the face of pressures originating from the military's adamant opposition to the Islamists which influences the attitudes of the judges, high state bureaucracy and mainstream secular media, the JDP embraced the legitimizing power and the virtue of democracy as a means of highlighting 'people power' vis-à-vis state power. They knew that they could survive only in a country that was democratically oriented, respecting civil and political rights, and moreover integrated further into the western world, particularly the EU.²⁵ This discursive turn, speaking the universal language of political modernity instead of Islam's particularities, also served to secure a place for a moderate Islamic identity.

The Islamists went through similar experiences concerning the value of human rights and the rule of law as they saw their political parties closed down, leaders banned from political activities, and associations and foundations intimidated. In response they moved to embrace the language of civil and political rights that provided both an effective leverage against the pressures of the state, as well as grounds to build international coalitions. Under the pressure of the Kemalist establishment, the Islamists sought to form new alliances with westerners abroad and liberals at home who distanced themselves from the elements of authoritarian regime in Turkey. The search for an international coalition led the Islamists to move westward, where they encountered numerous human rights organizations, the European Union, the European Court of Human Rights and individual states critical of Turkey's human rights record. In the end, the Islamists found themselves on the same side as the westerners, demanding democratization and further guarantees for civil and political rights in Turkey.²⁶

The EU emerged as a natural ally to reduce the influence of the army and to establish democratic governance within which Islamic social and political forces would be regarded as a legitimate player. The expectation was that the army's interventions in politics would be significantly lessened as a result of further democratization that had already been put as a precondition for Turkey's entry to the EU; a Kemalist state ideology guarded by the army would not be sustainable in an EU-member Turkey.²⁷

Sights set on Europe

As a result, the post-Islamists adopted a new and positive stand on understanding the West, Turkey's membership in the EU, and integration of Turkey into global structures and processes.²⁸ This was a clear break from their tradition of open "crusade" against the West, deep suspicions about Western values (including democracy and human rights), and criticism of the Turkish history of westernization.

As rejection of the West and westernization was the very basis on which modern Islamist identity was traditionally built, the rapprochement with the West and westernization shakes the very basis of Islamist political identity. What is left is not an Islamist identity as we know it. Transformation of the NVM from the early 1970s to the

late 1990s has given birth to a new political party (the JDP) with a liberal, democratic and pro-western orientation and political agenda. A movement that embraces modern political values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which advocates integration with the EU, and attracts votes from all segments of society can hardly be called Islamist. It is a case demonstrating that a discursive shift may be followed by identity change under certain circumstances. The Islamists' recent departure from their traditional anti-West and anti-westernization position seems to have transformed the Islamic self of Turkey, opening up new possibilities for the coexistence of Islam and the West.

Notes

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- ⁵ For a strong statement of anti-westernization in more recent times see Mehmet Doğan, *Batılılaşma İhaneti* (İstanbul, Beyan Yayınları, 1986). For an insider's critique of the Islamists' view of the West see Ahmet Harputlu, "İslamcıların Batı Tahayyülü," *Bilgi ve Düşünce* Vol.1, No.1 (2002), pp.23–27.
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- ⁹ Hasan H. Ceylan, (ed.), *Erbakan ve Türkiye'nin Temel Meseleleri* (Ankara: Rehber Yayınları, 1996), pp.99-100; *Milli Gazete*, September 21, 1995.
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- ¹² For February 28 decisions of NSC see "Recommendations of the State Council meeting and Comment," *Briefing*, March 10, 1997, p.4. For analyses of the NSC decision see M. Hakan Yavuz, "Cleansing Islam From the Public Sphere," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, No.1 (2000), pp.21–40; Ümit C. Sakallıoğlu and Menderes Çınarlı, "Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism and Politics in the Light of the February 28 Process," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.102, No.2/3 (2003), pp.309–32.

- ¹³ Yet many questioned the depth of this discursive shift undertaken by the NVM's leadership. As it turned out later the old guards in the movement moved back to their earlier position after the 2002 general elections in which the NVM's moderate and transformed wing came to power with the new formed Justice and Development Party.
- ¹⁴ For analyses of the election results and the JDP see Soli Özel, "Turkey at the Polls: After the Tsunami," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.14, No.2 (2003), pp.80–94; Ziya Öniş and E. Fuat Keyman, "Turkey at the Polls: A New Path Emerges," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.14, No.2 (2003), pp.95–108; Ali Çarkoğlu, "Turkey's November Elections: A New Beginning?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No.4 (2002), pp.30–41; Simten Coşan and Aylın Özman, "Centre-Right Politics in Turkey after the November 2002 General Election: Neo-Liberalism with a Muslim Face," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.10, No.1 (2004), pp.57–73; Mecham (2004), pp.339–358.
- ¹⁵ Erdoğan, before forming the party, contacted many people including businessmen like Rahmi Koç and a retired general, Atilla Kıyat, see *Sabah*, June 25, 2001; *Sabah*, July 4, 2001.
- ¹⁶ *Milliyet*, July 15, 2001. For an early description of Erdoğan as a moderate politician see Metin Heper, "Islam and Democracy: Toward a Reconciliation?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol.51, No.1 (1997), p.37.
- ¹⁷ Yalçın Akdoğan, *Muhafazakar Demokrasi* (Ankara: AK Parti Yayınları, 2003). The book was forwarded by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who hailed the publication of the book as an attempt to theorize the JDP's claim to be conservative democrat despite its Islamic origins. The party also organized an international symposium on conservatism and democracy held in Istanbul on January 10-11, 2004 commenced by Erdoğan's speech outlining the conservative stand of the party. For Erdoğan's speech in the symposium see *Uluslararası Muhafazakarlık ve Demokrasi Sempozyumu* (Ankara, AK Parti Yayınları, 2004), pp.7–17.
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- ²⁰ 2002 Election Declaration, at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/beyanname.doc>.
- ²¹ Helena Smith, "New breed of politicians start to find their feet," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2003.
- ²² A popular Islamist intellectual, Ali Bulaç, declared in 1999 that the project of an Islamic state has collapsed, interview with Neşe Düzel, *Radikal*, December 21, 1999. For an analysis of Islamist intellectuals' changing attitude towards globalization, human rights, democracy and the EU membership see İhsan D. Dagi, "Rethinking Human Rights, Democracy, and the West: Post-Islamist Intellectuals in Turkey," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 13, No.2 (2004), pp.135–151.
- ²³ Erdoğan's speech in the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, January 28, 2002 as commented on by İhsan D. Dagi, "İslami siyasette Batı ufku," *Radikal*, March 3, 2002.
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- ²⁶ Dagi (2004), pp.140–143.
- ²⁷ For an early analysis of this kind, see, "Is it Adieu to Ataturk?" *The Economist*, October 16, 1999. For the justification of the Islamists for supporting the EU membership see Ali Bulaç, "Niçin AB," *Zaman*, Dec. 11, 1999; Ali Bulaç, "Türkiye'nin ev ödevleri," *Zaman*, Feb. 16, 2000; Ali Bulaç, "FP, 312 ve demokrasi," *Zaman*, March 25, 2000; Ali Bulaç, "AB tartışması," *Zaman*, March 19, 2002.
- ²⁸ Ahmet Harputlu, "Türkiye'de İslamcılığın Dönüşümleri ve Yeni Politik Durum," *Bilgi ve Düşünce*, Vol.1, No.4 (Jan. 2003), pp.15–18.

Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.