The Status Quo, Extremism, and Reform: The Many Faces of Religious Authority in Turkey

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Shortly after Turkey’s government started a military offensive into Afrin in Northern Syria on January 2018, the Friday sermons—prepared by the Turkish state religious authority Diyanet and read in every mosque in the country—emphasized the religious significance of “conquest” and asked the congregation to pray for the soldiers. Under successive Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, the political alliance between Turkey’s official religious authority and its ruling Islamist party has been crafted on a range of issues, from supporting military incursions to fighting smoking or welcoming Syrian refugees. In such an environment where politics and religion are deeply intertwined, the power dynamics between various religious actors and the influence these actors enjoy among Turkish citizens as sources of religious authority can inform public debates about the role of religion in politics. The religious sphere in Turkey is highly contested.

SURVEY FINDINGS

In a survey of 1,972 Turkish citizens, described in detail in a previous country report (http://bit.ly/2HIMMpL), we examined religious authority in Turkey. The survey was part of a larger Baker Institute study on religious authority in the Middle East (https://bit.ly/2WfoqXT). The findings show that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan commands the trust of 40 percent of respondents as a religious authority, despite being a lay figure. This authority stems from a combination of his public performance of piety, charisma, status as a graduate of Imam Hatip school (state religious high school), and political clout as the leader of an Islamist party. Yet it is significant to note that an equally large portion of survey respondents (42 percent) do not trust Erdogan as a religious authority, showing the widespread polarization around him.

Nihat Hatipoglu, a religious scholar, academician, and popular television personality, follows Erdogan in popularity with 31 percent of public trust. Mehmet Görmez, the former head of Diyanet (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) commands the trust of 21 percent of the population, while Hayrettin Karaman, the most popular religious scholar among AKP circles, is trusted only by 11 percent of the respondents. İhsan Eliaçık, a writer and activist who embraces a reformist Islamic position and openly challenges the AKP, commands 16 percent of the public’s trust as a religious authority. Fethullah Gülen is the least trusted Turkish religious figure, with 4 percent of survey respondents declaring their trust in him, and a whopping 77 percent claiming that they do not trust him at all, the highest distrust score. This is not surprising, as Gülen’s Hizmet movement is completely securitized by the government and the opposition alike, particularly after the failed 2016 coup attempt for which it is held responsible.

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RELIGION AND THE STATE

With regard to the relationship between Islamist actors and the state, Turkey diverges from other surveyed Arab countries in certain ways that might affect perceptions of religious figures. As Brown (2017) states, Islamist movements are commonly seen as oppositional forces vis-à-vis the state religious establishment in the Arab world. State religious officials typically paint Islamists as politically motivated actors who distort the “true meaning” of religion, thereby positioning themselves against political Islam. In Turkey, however, the AKP’s rise to government in 2002 shifted religious dynamics significantly. The Diyanet, the state body tasked with administering religious affairs in Turkey, not only expanded in size but also became more conservative in its religious interpretations and embraced an Islamist approach to religion. Currently, the agency employs 117,000 people, and its budget has increased fourfold since 2006 (The Economist 2018). Thus, due to Islamist control of the state, we observe a notable overlap between official Islam and political Islam in Turkey.

This finding, a survey conducted in 2014 by KONDA shows that AKP supporters declared the highest level of trust in the Diyanet as a source of religious authority compared to supporters of other political parties (Helsinki Yurttaşlar Derneği 2014).

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

The survey results also carry important implications on religious extremism in Turkey. The leader of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, is the least trusted among the 14 figures included in the survey. The fact that he is trusted by a mere 3 percent of the respondents is encouraging and shows the very limited public appeal of IS in Turkey. At the moment, the ruling AKP and the Diyanet appear to be the most significant mainstream alternative to the extremist ideology of IS in Turkey.

Some of the religious youth disgruntled by the AKP’s statist Islam are more drawn to IS (Celik 2019). The Diyanet spearheaded efforts to combat the appeal of IS by publishing reports and circulating sermons that condemned the group’s ideology and Islamic credentials (Demir and Koru 2016). Thus, the argument goes, the United States’ continued engagement and cooperation with the AKP government and the state religious establishment as allies is key to preventing the spread of IS’ extremist
ideology in Turkey. This cooperation has important security implications, considering the accelerated bombing campaign initiated by the group in Turkey in 2016–2017. However, Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian civil war exposes a different undercurrent: the appeal that some extremist religious ideologies enjoy in the country. The spread of the Syrian civil war to Turkey—coupled with the Turkish government’s logistical support to particular jihadist groups, such as the now rebranded Al-Nusra Front, at different times during the conflict—along with these groups’ easy access to existing Salafi networks within the country might have boosted jihadists’ ability to propagate and recruit from within Turkey (Stein 2016). The Janus-faced relationship of the AKP toward religious extremism constitutes the crux of the issue. On one hand, U.S. foreign policy needs to form cooperative relations with the AKP in order to fight IS inside and outside of Turkey. On the other hand, the U.S. needs to use its leverage over Turkey to curtail the AKP’s alliance with jihadist currents in Syria and to act more firmly against their recruitment networks within Turkey.

RELIGIOUS REFORMISTS

The AKP’s relationship with extremism is not the only nexus in Turkey’s religious politics. The AKP is unquestionably a hegemonic actor in the country’s religiopolitical sphere; Erdogan personifies this religious influence as the party’s uncontested leader. Not only does the party control the state religious establishment and religious schools, it has also co-opted most of the country’s Islamic civil society organizations by incorporating them in the party’s patronage network. Due to the AKP’s hegemonic position, scholarship on religious politics in Turkey has overly focused on the AKP and until recently the Gülen movement—or the latter’s conflict with the AKP—without commensurate attention to alternative religious interpretations that might challenge the AKP’s authoritarian and nationalist Islamism. Of particular interest are reformist groups that challenge the AKP from a religious perspective. In the past decade, worker’s rights movements, youth groups, Islamic feminist organizations, and human rights groups coalesced around İhsan Eliaçık—an Islamic scholar with a reformist view of Islam. Eliaçık’s Islamic interpretations are tolerant toward religious minorities, embrace a liberal take on freedom of expression, support democracy, and challenge the statist, intolerant, and majoritarian discourse of pro-AKP religious figures. Our survey results confirm that Eliaçık’s democratic interpretations have some resonance in Turkish society. Respondents who are more likely to trust Eliaçık as a religious authority are more comfortable with the idea of their children marrying non-Muslims (i.e., more tolerant of other religions), more gender egalitarian, more likely to think there are multiple ways to interpret Islam, and more likely to think that “despite its flaws, democracy is the best political system” than respondents who declared trust in Erdogan and other pro-AKP religious figures.

A direct implication of this finding is that the issue of democracy in Turkey cannot be properly understood in the context of a secular–religious divide. Religious human rights associations such as the Hak Initiative and Islamic women’s rights organizations like the Muslim Initiative Against Violence Toward Women espouse a pluralist and democratic position in line with Eliaçık’s reformist religious teachings; therefore, they should be seen as potential partners in efforts to promote democracy. In particular, at a time when Turkey is experiencing anti-democratic policies and widespread human rights violations such as the arbitrary detention of Kurdish activists, arrests of journalists, and the purge of civil servants and academicians, support for such organizations is critical. In this context, these organizations might appeal to pious Turkish constituents in a way that secular civil society organizations would not.

While partnering with reformist Islamic organizations is desirable, instrumentalizing evangelical Christianity in U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Turkey is strategically damaging. This became most apparent during the imprisonment of American pastor Andrew

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Brunson. Rather than framing Brunson’s imprisonment in the broader context of human rights violations and grouping him together with other U.S. citizens jailed in Turkey, the Trump administration explicitly called Brunson a “man of faith” and used its attempts to free him to appeal to its evangelical base during the U.S. 2018 midterm election (Banks 2018). Framing the U.S.–Turkey bilateral relationship as a “religious conflict” between Islam and Christianity would surely backfire and aggravate the broadly shared anti-American sentiment among Turks. This type of partisan backing of Christian religious figures would not only send the wrong signal to Muslim citizens of the United States, but also strengthen the AKP’s conspiracy–laced, anti–American discourse amid widespread skepticism among the Turkish public of American meddling in regional affairs. Our survey findings confirm this sentiment, as 68% of the respondents claim they disapprove of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, while only 5% approve.

**RELIGION IN TURKEY’S FOREIGN POLICY**

The AKP government also incorporates Islam into foreign policy, using “religious soft power” in an attempt to “harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service of geopolitical objectives” (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 2). Ahmet Davutoğlu’s ambitions to revive Turkey’s Ottoman–era glory and regional influence were put into policy when he served first as foreign minister (2009–2014) then as prime minister (2014–2016) of successive AKP governments. During this period, Turkey’s outreach to other Middle East countries and the Balkans extended. As part of this religious diplomacy, the Diyanet has been building mosques in various parts of the world, including Albania, Somalia, Sudan, South Africa, and even the state of Maryland in the U.S., and offering scholarships for students to come to Turkey to study religion in Imam Hatip schools and divinity faculties. Moreover, the Diyanet Foundation operates offices in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia and provides religious services to Muslim communities abroad, while the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) aims to restore Ottoman heritage sites worldwide (Tol 2018).

In addition to its activism in religious soft diplomacy, the most distinguishable aspect of the AKP’s foreign policy in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings is its direct and indirect support of mainstream Islamist movements. The AKP, together with Qatar, acts as the patron of political Islam in an attempt to challenge Saudi Arabia’s regional hegemony (Yildirim and Ulrichsen 2018). In countries across the region such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Palestine, and Morocco, the AKP supported Islamist parties to bolster its image as the leader of populist Islamic interests. The Turkish government became the primary ally of the Morsi government during the reign of his Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt, and also supported the Muslim Brotherhood when the Egyptian state cracked down on the movement after the military takeover in 2013. During the brutal crackdown by the Al–Sisi government, many Muslim Brotherhood members found refuge in Turkey and were granted asylum by a government friendly to their cause (Ahval 2019). This patronage of Islamism was bolstered with Erdogan’s strong rebukes of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s policies toward Palestinians and of Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. These statements boosted Erdogan’s popularity among significant segments of Arab publics. Our survey results confirm this, as Erdogan is the most trusted figure regionwide, commanding the trust of 36 percent of all respondents in our survey of 12 countries and passing all other Arab religious figures in this category.

Turkey’s championing of Islamist causes clashes with the hawkish approach embraced by the Saudi–U.S. alliance against any Islamist involvement in Middle East politics.
because they still enjoy legitimacy among large segments of local populations relative to their authoritarian governments. When political opportunity structures change, and Islamists reassert themselves in domestic political scenes, Turkey’s close association with these groups can turn into an asset, as the U.S. inevitably will need to diplomatically and politically engage with them.

REFERENCES


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