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## **Islamism, Identity and Memory: Turkey Under Erdogan**

The studies of Turkish politics and society have developed around the center vs. periphery debate, or state vs. society, and Kemalism vs. Islamism. The dominant paradigm in the period from the 1970s through the 1990s, more or less, has utilized the center vs. periphery approach to explain ideological conflicts in the country.<sup>1</sup> Islam was treated as the identity and ideology of the periphery while Kemalism (i.e., the attempted project to create a secular nation-state along the lines of European institutions and practices) was treated as the ideology of the center epitomizing the doctrine of the modernization. Due to Turkey's lack of democratization and failed economic programs, many social scientists accused the Kemalism and its guardian, i.e., the military, as the key obstacle to democratization and economic development. A prevailing paradigm in the social science community suggested that when Turkey tears Kemalism apart, along with its institutions, especially the military, it will remove all obstacles clearing the way for democracy and establishing a classically liberal economic system. Because of this definition of Kemalism as a burden on the country's potential economically and politically, liberals and Islamists have allied their forces against the Kemalist power-bloc (i.e., the military, secular judiciary, and state bureaucracy). In an age of neo-liberalism where everyone criticized ineffective bureaucracy as aggravated by its size and the flexing of state power, the AKP leveraged this critique for its own purposes to undermine the state institutions and build its own Islamist self-serving political structure, as predicated on Erdogan's image as a savior of the nation.

The marginalization of conservative masses fostered a narrative of victimhood, stoking the concerns of vengeful generation in Turkey. This broad sentiment is best expressed by Necip Fazil Kısakurek, Erdogan's muse, as becoming "a pariah in one's own homeland".<sup>2</sup> Islamism has been reconstructed as a populist ideology to empower society against the inefficient Kemalist bureaucracy. This populist form of Islamism has become a useful tool in Erdogan's hands to portray disparagingly his opponents as alien, elitist, and the fifth column while claiming to represent the people and their indigenous values of Turkish society. Erdogan has succeeded in undermining the state institutions and especially the rule of law by establishing an authoritarian system through referenda.

Thus, we argue that this recent form of Islamist populism has damaged Turkey's relatively young democratic experiment and the evolution of a public sphere that cherishes constitutional rights of free expression and agency and this has to be scrutinized. In this regard,

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<sup>1</sup> Onur Bakiner (2018) A key to Turkish politics? the center-periphery framework revisited, *Turkish Studies*, 19(4), p. 503.

<sup>2</sup> Necip Fazil Kısakurek (1988) *Cile* (Istanbul: Buyuk Dogu Yayinlari), p. 339.

on April 1, 2019, a group of Turkey experts came together to discuss the transformation of Turkey under Erdogan and organized a one-day workshop at The University of Utah. This special issue evolved out from that one-day intense workshop and focuses on three sets of questions;

- 1) **The Context:** What are the major social, ideological, and political factors which have driven the transformation of the AKP? How and in what direction have the objectives and strategies of the AKP changed and how does one explain the divergence between professed ideals and practices? What have been the roles of external factors and powers in the transformation of the AKP?
- 2) **The July 15 Coup Attempt and Foreign Policy:** What are the major repercussions of the coup attempt on key Turkish state institutions and policies? How has the coup affected Turkish foreign policy towards regional and international powers?
- 3) **Methodological Issues:** How do we account for the current political crisis in Turkey and the government's moves toward authoritarianism? What have we, as a scholarly community, missed in our earlier studies of the AK Party? Does it make sense to study Turkish politics as just a clash between Islam and secularism or as a more complex set of circumstances?

Many participants in the 2019 workshop signaled an unexpected affinity between Islamist populism and neoliberalism in the case of Turkey. Erdogan's formulation of Islam has granted an essential ideology for neoliberalism to work and expand at the expense of the rule of law. Moreover, some participants insisted that Erdogan's Islamism is calculated to conceal intra-class conflict and engender false consciousness among the lower-middle classes. By utilizing Islam, Erdogan has created a new class configuration to hide corrupt practices, while providing charitable means to those in need, particularly those who identify as his most ardent supporters. The growing segment of the country's new urban poor is contained via a web of religious foundations to transfer food and some public services. Islam, under Erdogan, has become a Foucauldian disciplinary power. Foucault wrote "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of object and rituals of truth."<sup>3</sup> Erdogan's Islamism represses, censors, masks and hides the government's most blatant corrupt practices. Numerous participants raised the question about why scholars and observers failed to notice the direction Erdogan had taken in governing, especially as so many had celebrated him as a liberal Muslim politician seeking to fortify democracy in Turkey. This led to a spectrum of questions about Erdogan's core beliefs, his intentions, and his change in governing strategy within the contexts of internal and external events.

### **Transformation of Turkey under the AKP rule**

Undoubtedly, AKP governments collaborated with various segments of society in this project of transformation. For instance, academia and civil society elites, who are located mainly

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault (1974), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage), p. 194.

in Istanbul and Ankara and had been under the control and influence of segments with historically liberal and leftist tendencies, supported and defended AKP's policies at home and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a few exceptions, some of which had assimilated themselves into the classical, central-right parties, nearly all Islamic *cemaat*—fraternal organisations—ultimately supported the AKP in its nascent period. Prominent among these organisations was the controversial Gülen Movement, which AKP elected officials had viewed akin to a civil society organisation. However, the Gülen Movement also had propagated around the world through its educational institutions while seeking to participate in the state mechanisms within Turkey, from a Sunni Islamic tradition. Although the Gülen Movement and the AKP, as is often asserted, emerged from discreet Islamic traditions to usurp Kemalist sovereignty in Turkey, they created a coalition unifying their interests without a clear name and changing Turkey's previously inflexible bureaucratic order.<sup>5</sup> (Yavuz 2018, Watmough & Öztürk 2018).

But all this began to transform rapidly for various reasons: the advent of global illiberalization, the Arab Spring, an economic growth model removed from production and the Gezi Park protests. This set the stage for a wave of authoritarianism through which Erdoğan took control, out of fear of losing power. Turkey primarily changed the path it had set out on—touted as democracy, participation and liberalism—and moved towards a swift descent into authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> It opted to depart the coalition it had created with a portion of the Kurds and with the Gülen Movement and decided instead to engage in open conflict with these partners. While terrorizing these two groups, it moved to criminalize the opposition, using the judiciary and media organs that depended on the ruling government. It spoiled the peace process Turkey had developed with the Kurds<sup>7</sup> and set the stage for a public battle with the Gülen Movement.

The Gülen Movement's response to this and the much-debated 15 July 2016 coup d'état attempt precipitated Erdoğan's adoption of extraordinary powers under the guise of a victimized yet combative leader<sup>8</sup>. He declared himself president in a disputed referendum, modified the constitutional system and directed his administration towards an anti-Kurdish, anti-liberal and Eurasianist standard by setting up unnamed coalitions with the nationalist wing elements who were far removed from the Kemalist and Western notions Turkey had formerly allied with the Gülen Movement to incapacitate. This revealed a change that spilled out into the world, starting

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<sup>4</sup> Daghan Irak and Ahmet Erdi Ozturk (2018), Redefinition of state apparatuses: AKP's Formal–Informal Networks in the online realm, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 20(5), p.440.

<sup>5</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz (2018) A framework for understanding the Intra-Islamist conflict between the AK party and the Gülen movement, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19(1), pp. 11-32. Simon P Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2018) From 'diaspora by design' to transnational political exile: the Gülen Movement in transition, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19(1), pp. 33-52.

<sup>6</sup> Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu (2016) Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey, *Third World Quarterly* 37(9), pp. 1581-1606. Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2017). *Authoritarian politics in Turkey: Elections, resistance and the AKP*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing)

<sup>7</sup> Mehmet Gurses (2018) *Anatomy of a Civil War*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

<sup>8</sup> Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2019) An alternative reading of religion and authoritarianism: the new logic between religion and state in the AKP's New Turkey, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19(1), pp. 79-98.

domestically in its diaspora policy and overflowing into the general perception of Turkey with its foreign policy, systemic problems and the Kurdish question. Once the AKP had accomplished the initial phase of this project of transformation, it would continue to expand its impact while reaffirming Erdoğan's tenure in power. This special issue is an effort to understand this dramatic period of transformation.

### **Contributions of the special issue**

The first article is written by Paul Kubicek who directly engages with some of the key methodological questions involved in how the earlier record of scholarship treated the AKP in general and Erdogan in particular. The earlier record accepted the story of the AKP on its political face value, treating it as an agent for democratization. Many international actors including the European Union and global media, such as *The Economist* and *the New York Times*, also supported the AKP as the essential agent of change and liberalization. As of 2020, Erdogan, however, has turned the AKP into his own party, operating like his personalized organization and he has become the most oppressive leader in Turkish history. Kubicek argues that neither he nor many scholars had expected this outcome from Erdogan. So, he examines why the scholarly community failed to anticipate this authoritarian outcome. In addition to the EU membership process, which the AKP supported, many scholars argued that even though the AKP had evolved from the Islamist National Outlook Movement, the AKP moderated to position itself as the agent of democracy and political moderation. This article not only raises ethical and methodological issues but also offers a way for recontextualizing the origins and the evolution of the AKP.

Secondly, Fumiko Sawae, a leading scholar of Turkish studies in Japan, offers a unique perspective by arguing that Erdogan's transformation was not only his making but also his response to the expectations of his grassroots supporters. She offers a nuanced reading of this transformation by utilizing the extant literature on populism. She employs the concept of the "politics of belonging" to examine Erdogan's new Islamic-nationalistic rhetoric. This brings up a painful acknowledgment of Turkey's political culture, which appears to be conducive to authoritarianism in the name of belonging or the survivability of the state.

Umut Uzer examines how the AKP leadership has narrated the Ottoman history to justify its domestic and foreign policy with the goal of restoring Turkey's historical greatness. The founding fathers of the Republic had distanced themselves from the institutions, practices, and discourses of the Ottoman system and had sought to establish a secular nation-state by imitating the Western model. In the reforms of Mustafa Kemal, the Ottoman past became the "other" or "another country" to be freed. Islamists, such as Kısakürek and Erdogan, meanwhile, created a romanticized Ottoman past to challenge the Kemalist republic and undermine the westernizing reforms.<sup>9</sup> By utilizing the ideas of Kısakürek (1904-1983), Erdogan's ideological role model, the

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<sup>9</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz (2019) "Understanding Turkish secularism in the 21st century: a contextual roadmap." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19 (1), pp. 55-78.

AKP leadership has been redefining the nation as Islamo-Ottoman and the state as an entity to serve Islamic causes.

Meanwhile, Adisonmez and Onursal provide a detailed reading of the ontological security of the state and how the state has been sacralized in Turkish political culture. They examine Erdogan's successful leveraging of fear and deep insecurities among the Turkish population to mobilize the masses for the survival of the indivisible state and its sovereignty as the ultimate goal in Turkish politics. By examining the discourse on ontological (in)security, they analyze how Erdogan has used the high stakes political debate of the survival of state and unity of the nation to justify his authoritarian and kleptocratic practices.

The most important challenge Turkey has faced recently is how to accommodate its assertive Kurdish minority. The Kurdish question has become the existential issue for the Republic of Turkey. In this regard, Mehmet Gurses examines the evolving Kurdish question in Turkey with an emphasis on how it is interacting with changing domestic, regional, and global dynamics. He offers a comprehensive, potent argument about how Erdogan turned the Kurdish political movement into an "enemy of the Turkish state," while using all available means to deny the basic political rights to the Kurds. He insists that the recognition of Kurdish identity claims might be the only way to free Turkey from this burden and its mortgages with the major powers.

Erdogan not only controls the population inside Turkey, but he also uses various strategies to control the Turkish diaspora and, wherever possible, manipulates these diaspora communities for his own narrow political goals. Erdogan has not assisted meaningfully to integrate these diaspora communities within their respective host countries. On the contrary, he has planted seeds of suspicion in host countries, which have placed the respective Turkish minority population at risk. Baser and Ozturk's papers examine the ways in which Erdogan has manipulated the diverse Turkish diaspora communities in Europe. They argue that authoritarian states particularly employ diaspora governance as a mechanism to monitor and control diaspora groups, which home communities perceive as dissidents.

The AKP governing administrations had effected considerable changes in Turkey's foreign policy and diaspora relations, at least until 2011. It underwent a relatively active process by activating the concepts of soft power and diaspora diplomacy through transnational state apparatuses.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, but with a different aspect, Kosebalaban analyzes the shift from a liberal-oriented foreign policy to a more nationalistic and security-oriented program. He argues that this break occurred amid the Syrian civil war and the failure of the Turkish state to cope with the crisis. Kosebalaban aptly argues that Turkey's foreign policy goal of overthrowing Assad morphed into an objective of preventing gains among the Kurdish minority along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The final paper in this edition encompasses an analysis of the historical fears and memories of the Republic. The founding fathers not only tried to "otherize the Ottoman past" as

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri (2018) *Diyanet as a Turkish foreign policy tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria*. *Politics and Religion* 11(3), pp. 624-648.

a “foreign land” but also worked hard to forget it. This sense of amnesia was necessary and justified to overcome the revanchist feelings and the emergence of vengeful nationalism in Anatolia. They insisted the essence to “invent a new Turkish identity as European,” not to “discover” Islamo-Ottoman-rooted identity. They justified the act of forgetting, in order to create a new identity. This paper indicates that mixing history with politics becomes problematic. The author concurs with David Rieff’s well-known book that “the commemoration of past wrongs can become a moral cudgel, cynically weaponized over and over again for political ends.”<sup>11</sup> Whenever foreign powers have difficulty with Turkey or their interests conflict with Turkish demands, they “misuse” the massacres of Armenians, characterizing them as genocide to shame Turkey. In 2019, when Turkey’s interests conflicted with the U.S. over the Syrian civil war and became more aggressive vis-à-vis the U.S. alliance with the Kurdish militias, both chambers of the U.S. Congress voted to recognize and remind Turkey that the events of 1915 constituted a “genocide.” Turkey, in turn, reminded the U.S. that they are not in the position to lecture Turkey, given that American history is punctuated by ethnic cleansing against the native Americans, slavery and ongoing practices of racism against the country’s non-white population.

No case involving Turkey has been more politicized than the events of 1915 because of their repeated misuse of the history as a tactical objective to shame Turkey. Yavuz’s paper summarizes the historiography, memory, and the Armenian attempts to sacralize the past as “genocide” in order to deflect alternative historically accurate interpretations of the events. Yavuz, by examining the Turkish and Armenian historiography, deals with the issue of memory, identity and the process of otherizing the “Turks” as a genocidal enemy. The article explores why Armenians have sought to engage international parliaments and courts to frame the events of 1915 as genocide. The process of “genociding” the events also is the outcome of Armenian attempts not to face their own history of revolutionary committees and their destructive impacts. After examining these competing historiographies, Yavuz offers a way for how both sides can come together by humanizing the mutual suffering of each group and developing a shared language that encompasses the comprehensive impact of the events of 1915.

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<sup>11</sup> “How genocide denial wraps Turkish politics,” <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/how-genocide-denial-warps-turkish-politics> (accessed April 2, 2020).

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