

Turkey : A Case Study in Failure to Secularize

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Kemal Ataturk was born in Salonika , in 1881. That city in northern Greece (known also as Macedonia ,) was still part of the Ottoman Empire . From his earliest days, he did not behave as a good Muslim; his mother often remarked about his lack of respect for “*Allah’s Shadow on earth.*” She was referring to the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul , who was not only the Ruler of the empire, but acted as the Caliph of the worldwide Islamic Umma. Mustapha Kemal, as his full name was, enrolled in the army, and soon began to climb in the ranks of the officer corps.

The Ottomans joined Germany and Austria against the Allies in WWI. When the war ended with the defeat of Germany and its allies, it appeared as if the Ottomans were going to lose not only their distant territories, but a good part of the Turkish heartland. Mustapha Kemal rallied the remnants of the Ottoman Army, and managed to defeat the Allies, and forced them to leave Turkey . He became the undisputed leader of the country, and earned the honorary title of “**Ataturk,**” i.e. the *Father of the Turks!*

Ataturk had many ambitious plans for his country. He declared Turkey a republic, abolished the Caliphate in 1924, and invited Western scholars to re-write Turkish laws by secularizing them. Other changes followed in rapid succession: the Arabic-based Ottoman script was replaced by a Latin-based alphabet. Men were no longer permitted to wear the fez, and women were forbidden to wear the veil. However, we should not imagine that Turkey adopted a truly Western democratic model. This fact was made clear recently in an article published by the Italian online magazine *Chiesa*, dated March 22, 2006:

“[...] in fact, Turkish secularism has little in common with the liberal, Enlightenment-inspired doctrine of the so-called separation between Church and state in the public arena. In Islam, whether fundamentalist or radical or moderate, there is no distinction between the religious and the political arena; the two realities interpenetrate each other. [...] In the Christian world, on the contrary, there are two powers, that of God and that of Caesar; these can be associated or separate, they can be in harmony or in conflict, as has often been the case in history – but they are always two powers, distinct from each other and autonomous in their respective areas of competence.”

After the death of Ataturk in 1938, the secular tradition continued under the tutelage of the army. His successor, **Ismet Inönü** was a former officer in the Ottoman Army. He continued the policies of his predecessor. Certain basic Islamic traditions such as the **Call of Prayer** chanted in Arabic, had to be done in Turkish. And those devout Turks of Anatolia would no longer be permitted to go on the **Hajj!** Still, as the article in *Chiesa* put it

“But Turkish Islam, expelled from the public sphere, survives and prospers in civil society: in the numerous Sufi confraternities and in the pro-Islamic political movements that have emerged in recent decades. This complex Islamic movement includes various tendencies within itself, both the fundamentalist tendency inspired by the radical movements present in almost all the Islamic

countries that preach jihad against the “atheist and corrupt” West and want shari’a to be the law of the state, and the moderate tendency that is eager for dialogue with modernity and interested in forming friendly relationships with the Western world. [...]”

<http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=47175&eng=y>

Having explained the background of modern Turkey and the attempt of its leaders to secularize all aspects of Turkish culture, I submit the following thesis: The history of Turkey since 1918, serves as a **Case Study in the Impossibility to Permanently Secularize Islam.**

Successive developments within the Turkish Republic , since the death of Ataturk in 1938, demonstrate that his great efforts to permanently change his country’s allegiance to Islam were not to be successful. Both he, and his immediate successors, failed to realize how deep-rooted Islam was, especially in the rural areas of Turkey . It would turn out that the citizens of Istanbul and Ankara , and other metropolitan centers near the Mediterranean, were unable to counter-balance the efforts of the faithful Muslims of Anatolia (central and eastern Turkey) who sought to restore to Islam the privileged status it had enjoyed in the life of their country. The very democratic system that gave every citizen the right to vote eventually brought about the victory of a nascent Islamic party. This proved that more Turks preferred some version of the Ottoman Islamic tradition to prevail rather than the secularized ideology of Ataturk.

I have been musing along these thoughts ever since the rise to power of an Islamist leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Finally, an article in the Wall Street Journal of March 18, 2006, reminded me how urgent the subject has become. The title of the article was: **After Ataturk.** The **Interview** with Mr. Erdogan had this sub-title: *Talking Turkey with Ankara 's Islamist prime minister.* It was conducted by Robert L. Pollock, a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board. (**Recep** is pronounced: “**Rejep.**” The letter “**c**” in Turkish has the equivalence of “**j**” in English or French.)

After exchanging some pleasantries, Mr. Erdogan remarked about a Turkish movie, “**Valley of the Wolves – Iraq** ” that Mr. Pollock had seen, and said, “*They might ban you from re-entering the United States .*” Now when the interviewer asked the Prime Minister whether he had seen the film, he did not answer directly but asked in return: “*What did you think of the movie?*” “*To which I reply that it made me sad. While there are many things one might criticize about U.S. policy in Iraq the suggestion that U.S. troops are murdering and dismembering Iraqis to facilitate a Jewish organ-selling scheme isn't one of them.*”

As one who has mastered the art of evasion, Prime Minister Erdogan retorted that Mr. Pollock himself had written an article in the Wall Street Journal that made him sad, because it was not based on facts!

Actually, the opposite was true. Mr. Pollock’s article dealt with a wave of “**anti-American madness.**” There were headlines in Turkish newspapers “*calling U.S. soldiers ‘Murderer Johnny’* and newspaper articles describing imagined atrocities such as the use of chemical weapons--and, yes, organ theft--committed against civilians in Iraq. And rather than express his disapproval of such reports, the Prime Minister went on a tangent, by claiming that “*These kinds of things happen in the world. If it’s not happening in Iraq, then it’s happening in other countries.*” And when cornered to be more explicit, he weaseled out of his spot: “*I’m not saying they are being killed. . . . There are people in poverty who use this as a means to get money.*”

Reflecting on this interview, Mr. Pollock ended with these words:

“Ever since Mr. Erdogan's Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party swept to power on 35% of the vote in 2002 elections (amazingly, only one other party passed the 10% threshold for parliamentary representation), people have questioned whether his smooth manner wasn't cover for a more radical agenda to fundamentally change the secular character of the Turkish Republic established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

“No, if there is any cause for concern here, it would be the undeniable fact that Turkey's first successful overtly Islamic prime minister has cultural and foreign policy compasses different from those of earlier Turkish leaders, who have inclined steadily toward the West. I sense a deeper estrangement at work than mere disagreement over Iraq, and whether or not to use force to remove roadblocks to democracy in the Middle East. "When we took office there was a Turkey which was not having talks with its neighbors. Now Turkey is having a dialogue with all of them. That's why we don't want any bombs to fall anymore in our region," Mr. Erdogan says.

“But can he really believe this saccharine rhetoric, and that "all problems" can be solved at the negotiating table? (It's been less than a decade since Turkey nearly invaded Syria.) Or is it mere cover for the theories of advisers who believe that Turkey can be a bigger player on the world stage by distancing itself from the U.S.? And does he not recognize the import of the concession that his somewhat cavalier confidence on Iran is possible because NATO (i.e., the U.S.) ultimately stands behind Turkey? After all, such 'strategic' alliances are not written in stone. They are dependent over the long term on public attitudes in the countries involved. As I leave his office I wonder how carefully he has thought through what would seem to be a most pressing question: Of what value will Turkey's opinion really be in a world of increasing or unresolved tension with the U.S. and where, God forbid, the mad mullahs next door have nukes?

I more than share the concerns of Mr. Pollock regarding Turkey's future relations with the West under the leadership of an Islamist Prime minister who has mastered the art of **Kitman** (Concealment). I have no doubt that Mr. Erdogan imagined that his duplicitous style would persuade a representative of the WSJ, that nothing was to be feared about the future course of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. However, I am sure that Mr. Pollock saw through the feigned magnanimity of Mr. Erdogan as his closing remarks showed a deep concern for Turkey's future, especially as it has been knocking at the door of the European Union.

When I look back at the tumultuous events that followed the end of the Great War (WWI) and taking into account the tenacity of Mustapha Kemal Ataturk as he sought to modernize his country, I can understand how his efforts were initially successful. As a brilliant military leader he did his utmost to modernise Turkey according to his deep-seated secular worldview. However, he underestimated the strong allegiance that most of the Turks of Anatolia held for Islam. Thus, gradually Ataturk's legacy was being undermined by the resurgence of Islamic political parties after decades of economic and political upheavals. The Islamists took advantage of the outward and structural aspects of democracy, and “legally” gained power. But from that point on, the chipping away at Kemalism, as Ataturk's legacy is known, continued. Nothing can stop it, as far as I can see. In the rural areas of Turkey, the population is increasing at a faster rate than in the metropolitan areas of Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and other cities near the Mediterranean. This indicates that the Islamists have a greater pool of votes coming from committed true believers who dream of reviving the glories of the Ottoman past.

I would like to make one more point that supports my thesis. Even when the Kemalists ruled Turkey, their secular ideology was never similar to the Western European kind that tolerated pluralism and true democracy. Ataturk's regime had no use for non-Turks living within the republic, and did his best to expel them as happened to the Greek population of Smyrna (Izmir.) Most Christians that had lived for centuries within the heartland of the Ottoman Empire eventually immigrated either to nearby countries in the Middle East, or to the Americas. In other words, the Turkish Republic, as created by Ataturk was never a genuine democracy. And yet its leaders keep knocking at the door of the European Union seeking full membership! One wonders what would become of the E.U. should seventy million Turks, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, become full citizens of this Union!