Islamism in Republican Turkey

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Abstract

The chapter discusses Islamism in Republican Turkey and assesses its future in Turkey's current social and political context. It argues that, if Islamism is understood as a political ideology that seeks to restructure the political process and, through it, to reform society according to Islamic principles, Islamism has been and will remain a movement of important but limited political appeal in Republican Turkey. On the basis of this narrow definition, the chapter analyses two strands of Islamism, the nationalist associated with Milli Görüş (National Outlook) and the "renewalist" seeking to reform Islam through a re-reading of its foundational texts. Strands from conservative parties merged with elements of nationalist Islamism to constitute the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), which has been in power in Turkey since 2002. Ultimately, Turkish Islamism may have opposed the republic, but it was also, inevitably, a product of its sociopolitical and legal context.

Introduction

Outlining the major trends and trajectory of Islamism, used here interchangeably with 'political Islam,' in republican Turkey, depends on the definition of the term. I argue in this chapter that, if it is understood as a political ideology that seeks to restructure the political process and, through it, to reform society according to Islamic principles, Islamism has been and will remain a movement of important but limited political appeal in republican Turkey. Even during its 30-

year heyday, from the 1970s to the late 1990s, it failed to capture the main political ground and to become a majority position. That said, Islamism in Turkey has been hugely successful when it has merged or interacted with a variety of 'kin' political ideologies and movements. It has achieved political success through a polygamous marriage with conservative ideologies and schools of thought, nationalism, and economic liberalism. This chapter will outline the main characteristics of Turkish Islamism—focusing on intellectual developments rather than on the movement's political fortunes—and assess its future in Turkey's current social and political context.

Islamism (*İslamcılık*) is a fiercely contested term in Turkey. It is infused with different meanings by various actors and can refer to divergent strands of thought with either positive or negative connotations, depending on who uses it. Some actors consider it an offensive label and reject its application to themselves even though they are described by others as Islamists; sometimes this is the case because the term is associated with violence. Similar issues pertain to a variety of other terms that describe specific variants of Islamism, such as *yenilikçi* (renewalist), *ıslahatçı* (reformist), and *ihyacı* (revivalist) Islamism. I will refer to the substance of these terms in what follows, but their inconsistent and polemical use in Turkey renders them inappropriate as conceptual frameworks for my argument. Instead, I will use my own definitions and deploy terms in English rather than Turkish.

I define Islamism narrowly as a political ideology—and associated organized political movement—that, as such, seeks to influence and, ultimately, capture and shape the political process with a view to reforming society at large through political action, usually consisting of the formation of political parties or other entities that seek power.[1] "Islamist" is not the same as "Muslim" or "Islamic."[2] As with all ideologies, Islamism is a blueprint for the ideal society. Islamism is not used here to denote a call for spreading religious values in society, and it is not synonymous with religious activism. A Muslim need not be an Islamist: she or he can be deeply

religious in his or her personal life but still favor the separation of religion and politics or, in other words, espouse either a secular or an apolitical position. Islamism, as I understand it, connotes neither the use of religious imagery or symbolism in political discourse nor a call for Islamic values to inform the moral purpose behind decision-making in the political process. Instead, Islamism proposes that these moral values must alter (not just inform the moral intent behind) the structures, institutions, and priorities of the political process and reform economic policy, often through religious leaders, broadly defined, becoming political leaders. Islamists do not merely want 'good Muslims' to govern; they want experts in Islamic governance or law to do so.

Based on the above definition, there have existed two strands of Islamism in republican Turkey, both of which emerged in the political domain in the 1970s and thereafter (even though their roots are to be found in previous decades): the nationalist Islamism that is linked to the series of political parties led by Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011) and infused with the ideology of the Milli Görüş (National Outlook), which sought to combine Islam, development, and politics, and a heterogeneous assortment of groups and strands of thought that I collectively label, for want of a better word, 'renewalist' (not to be confused with the term *yenilikçi* and the subgroup of Islamists it refers to in Turkey). I discuss them in turn in what follows, placing them in the context of a broader 'Islamic' public space and outlining their key ideological principles, insofar as they apply to politics, in comparison to other Islamic or conservative actors—honing my definition of Islamism in the process and returning to it in the conclusion. The broader Turkish-Islamic public space includes the Turkish diaspora in Europe, geographically, and right-wing, conservative ideologies and political parties that used Islam but were not Islamist; a dense network of Islamic informal social and cultural religious associations that promoted Islam, albeit not in a directly political sense; and a conservative nationalist discourse that was antiestablishment but also, in part, permeated state actors and institutions.

Right-wing, conservative political parties, from the Demokrat Parti (DP, "Democrat Party," 1946–1960) in the 1950s to the Adalet Partisi (AP, "Justice Party," 1961–1981) and the Anavatan Partisi (ANAP, "Motherland Party," 1983–2009), interacted with Islamist parties, feeding into them and being, in turn, strengthened by them. Strands from these conservative parties merged with elements of nationalist Islamism to constitute the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, "Justice and Development Party")—not an Islamist party, according to my definition in this chapter—which was established in 2001 and has been in power in Turkey since 2002. There was also cross-fertilization between Islamist groups and the extreme right-wing, nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP, "Nationalist Action Party," f. 1969) and its related intellectuals and associations, and between some renewalist Islamists and leftist ideologies and organizations; I touch on these in my analysis.

Turkish Islamism may have opposed the republic, but it was also, inevitably, a product of its sociopolitical and legal context. First, it emerged and developed within the ideational and material parameters constructed by a Kemalist military and bureaucratic vanguard that succeeded, over several decades, in instilling secularism (or *laicism*) and nationalism in the collective Turkish psyche. One measure of the former is that popular preference for introducing '*shari'a*' law has been lower in Turkey than in many other Muslim-majority countries (for a discussion, see Çarkoğlu 2020). A number of caveats apply here. Being a Muslim has been, since the foundation of the republic, and despite the secular constitutional framework, an indispensable part of being a Turk (Islam as a criterion of group membership is not tantamount to favoring Islamism as a political ideology). The Kemalist elite, from the 1950s and 1960s, became more accommodating toward Islam as an important aspect of Turkish identity (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008, 60–61). State institutions such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (the *Diyanet*) and, after 2002, numerous others, such as ministries and cultural and media organizations, have been infiltrated by Islamic sympathizers of various persuasions

(Mumcu 1993; Lord 2018), further subverting the professed separation between religion and state institutions. However, despite these caveats, there is still a formal separation of religion and state in Turkey that constitutes the legal framework within which political debate and contestation unfold. No major political party has advocated for the abolition of secularism in Turkey, and this is so to this day. Similarly, 'Turkey' as an entity is sacrosanct, and its territorial boundaries frame political debate. Islamist movements of all hues in Turkey push for a redefinition of what it means to be a Turk. But they do so in an environment in which the paramount importance ascribed to being a Turk, however defined, in contradistinction to being "Muslim," for example, let alone a Kurd, remains undisputed.

Second, Turkish Islamism is a product of and partakes in the authoritarian, hierarchical, and anti-individualistic nature of Turkish political culture—a culture that more or less prevails, with some liberal exceptions and despite some recent advances, across the board, including on the left. It is interesting that the centuries-old term *siyaset* (which means "politics" in today's Turkish) meant arbitrary punishment by the elites at the sultan's command in the Ottoman context; Carter Vaughn Findley (2010, 46) writes, for example, that "the sultan had the power of arbitrary discipline (*siyaset*) over his slaves." Naturally, the meaning of the word has changed, but the echo of history arguably still reverberates in its current usage. Turkish political culture privileges 'the leader,' 'the great man' or the 'wise or righteous man' (it is prototypically a man) giving direction to those below him. There is emphasis on conformity to and respect for the group—one reason why Turkish political culture contains a strong statist vein, why politics is often equivalent to the dispensing of patronage or favor, and why the procurement of votes replaces political activism. The hierarchical, top-down nature of Turkish political culture restricts female political participation: Islamist parties are not the exception here, and they remain male dominated despite the valiant efforts of individual women activists (Bora 2017, 800–816). Islamism also shares specific similarities with Kemalism in, for

example, seeing politics as the exclusive activity of the virtuous, presenting rival political factions as deceived and ignorant, and viewing the masses as needing to be compassionately guided to the "true path" (Çınar 2004, 173–176).

Third, Turkish Islamism has been shaped by the material context of Turkey's socioeconomic evolution. Turkey is a sociologically advanced country and has an institutionally complex polity. It is therefore secularized in the sense of being functionally and institutionally differentiated (Taylor 2007), which would hinder any realistic prospect of Islamization. Furthermore, the social and economic transformation of the country over the hundred years of the republic, and especially since the adoption of an export-led growth model and the globalization of the economy in the 1980s, has forced all Islamist parties to alter their programs and ideological positions in order to increase their appeal to the electorate.

Nationalist Islamism

The single-party period (1923–1945), dominated by Mustafa Kemal's (1881–1938) Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, "Republican People's Party," f. 1923), saw the abolition of the caliphate and a series of legal reforms, particularly in the 1920s, which led to the establishment of secularism and the formal banning of religion from public life.[3] Islam lost the role of state religion with the 1928 amendment of the 1924 Constitution. The Ottoman religious class (the *ulama*) were replaced by new state functionaries, *shari'a* courts were abolished, allusions to Islam were marginalized in public discourse, and institutions and organizations such as the *tarikat*s (Sufi organizations) and other religious associations were declared illegal. As a result, an entire generation of Islamic thinkers and activists was distanced from late Ottoman Islamic thought, both traditional and progressive, and became detached from politics.

The reign of strict secularism during the single-party era was followed by a period of changing relations between religion and state in which Islam, in its many incarnations, was allowed more

space. Prohibitions became less stringent after the 1950 election victory of the DP, which had been established in opposition to the CHP and embodied a significant strand of right-wing, conservative political ideology.[4] The DP did not propose reversing secularism and introducing Islamic principles into the process of government, but it appealed to and instrumentalized religion for political advantage. It was "secular in orientation" but tolerant toward religion, and it was this tolerance, rather than "the religious basis of its political ideology," that made it popular among the voters (Turan 1991, 45). It allowed the use of Islamic imagery in public life, and its leaders alluded to religious principles to attract votes. It presented itself as the alternative to the CHP that would safeguard religious values and reflect the authentic will of 'the people.'

The DP was banned by the military coup of 1960 but was replaced in 1961 by the AP. Led by Süleyman Demirel (1924–2015) from 1964, it dominated the right-wing political space in the 1960s and 1970s, starting with an electoral victory in 1965. Necmettin Erbakan, a central figure in the Milli Görüş movement, applied to become a parliamentary candidate for the AP in 1969, but Demirel refused, partly because he did not want competition from a charismatic figure who was already proving popular. Erbakan established the Milli Nizam Partisi (MNP, "National Order Party," 1970–1971) after this rejection, which indicates that the ideological differences that developed between the two parties were accentuated by political competition.[5] The MNP and its successors, the Milli Selamet Partisi (MSP, "National Salvation Party," 1972–1981), the Refah Partisi (RP, "Welfare Party," 1983–1998), Fazilet Partisi (FP, "Virtue Party," 1997–2001) and Saadet Partisi (SP, "Felicity Party," f. 2001) shared with AP and its successor, Doğru Yol Partisi (DYP, "True Path Party," 1983–2007), views about social and cultural Islam but diverged on the political role of Islam, with Erbakan seeing it as a model for reshaping politics.

Erbakan's ideological beliefs, the Milli Görüş philosophy, and the series of nationalist Islamist parties that followed the 1970 creation of the MNP were closely linked with the Nakşibendi Sufi order, which according to Ayata (1991, 224) dominated both its leadership and rank and

file. "Nakşibendi" is an umbrella term comprising diverse entities whose approaches to politics varied significantly among themselves and also changed over time—but one could hazard a generalization by stating that the Nakşibendi were religious traditionalists, conservative, and prostate. The Mujeddidi and Halidi branches of the Nakşibendi were concerned with spiritual renewal but also very much involved in politics (Tapper 1991, 15–16). The Halidi branch of the Nakşibendi had "established themselves at the center of the political process in the nineteenth century" (Mardin 1989, 57). They had to adapt to a profoundly changed environment when "Islam," in its official incarnations, was severed from the state with the arrival of the republic, but later the Nakşibendis' "historically positive orientation toward the state" encouraged them to take jobs in the *Diyanet* and to "colonize" it (Findley 2010, 20).

Mardin (1991, 135, 139) argues that "the Nakşibendi order has always been on the alert for opportunities to use power for what it considered the higher interests of Muslims"—even though the relationship with politicians should not be too close because the "Islamic faith will by itself put one on the political warpath without any abrupt transition from faith to ideology." Representing this tradition, one Nakşibendi order, İskenderpaşa, under the leadership of Mehmet Zahid Kotku (1897–1980) from 1958, was instrumental in the birth and development of nationalist Islamism and the formation of Erbakan's ideology. Kotku's predecessor, Abdülaziz Bekkine (1895–1952), was against the mixing of Islam and electoral politics, but Kotku, an anti-Western thinker, preached taking over the state from within. He gave his blessing to Erbakan to form the MNP (Cornell 2015).

Not all Sufi groups and thinkers agreed among themselves on whether Islam should be politicized or on the form that this politicization should take. The Halidi Nakşibendi approach may have stood for the "supremacy of and commitment to politics and political action" (while also emphasizing withdrawal from the material joys of life), but the Kadiri order, in contrast, advocated for the "rejection of the world for the sake of attaining a higher level of moral

integrity and inner spiritual perfection" (Ayata 1991, 225). What is more, the manner of politicization varied: for example, the İsmailağa order, originally Nakşibendi but distinct in its approach, was not particularly interested in worldly affairs and did not encourage political participation even though it would get the vote out for Milli Görüş parties (Çakır 2002, 66–67).

Even from within the Nakşibendi (or, originally, Nakşibendi) tradition, not all groups and thinkers gave their support to Milli Görüş parties, and even those that did fluctuated in doing so. We saw that İskenderpaşa and Kotku were vital for the MNP and the MSP, but there was friction between them in the late 1970s, and Kotku's successor, Mahmut Esat Coşan (1938–2001), distanced İskenderpaşa from politics (Bacik 2020, 136) and broke with the RP in the 1990s (Hale and Özbudun 2010, 16). Later, İskenderpaşa and the Erenköy order (another important Nakşibendi entity) shifted support to ANAP, which was established in 1983. The Süleymancıs, which also hail from the Nakşibendi, supported the AP in the 1970s and ANAP in the 1980s (Hale and Özbudun 2010, 15).

The case of the Nurcu movement and its offshoots is particularly illustrative of this fragmented and fluctuating loyalty of Nakşibendi entities (and leads to even more questioning of "Nakşibendi" as a useful or meaningful label). The founder of the Nurcu movement, Said Nursi (1873–1960), was a Nakşibendi, but he initiated his own school of Islamic thought and type of religious association (*cemaat*). Nursi announced his withdrawal from politics in the 1920s, and he did not oppose the republic and the secular state (Mardin 1989, 99). He focused on individuals as a community, not as subjects of a political order (Mardin 1989, 102), and he argued that the spheres of *shari'a*, social life, and politics are of secondary or tertiary importance compared to true belief (Çakır 2002, 88). However, even though he had renounced political mobilization, he expected that religious mobilization would naturally have political consequences. From 1950, he continued to abstain from politics but encouraged his followers to participate (Findley 2010, 287), and following this shift from religious back to political and

social issues, the Nurcu supported first the DP and then the AP (Mardin 1989, 40) and the DYP. The formation of the MNP and the MSP attracted the support of a small section of the Nurcu community (alongside İskenderpaşa), but it reverted to the AP after 1974. (In fact, the Nurcus had divided by that stage to more than 10 subgroups, most of which supported the AP and the DYP.) One of the most influential Nurcu groups, the Fethullah Gülen movement, fell behind ANAP in the 1980s and 1990s and even backed the February 28th "soft coup" that removed Erbakan's coalition government from power in 1997.

The nationalist Islamist ideology of MNP and its successor parties developed in the context of a conservative strand of nationalist thought that broke with the Kemalist cultural or ethnic (or even racial) definition in favor of one that took into account Islam as an important element of Turkish identity (Uzer 2016, 163–221; Taşkın 2007).[6] Conservative nationalism in general moved from the margins to the mainstream from the 1950s to the 1980s. Although it was a secular ideology (Uzer 2016, 164), it followed a parallel path—some would say it had a symbiotic relationship—with Islamic thought in general and with Islamist ideology in particular. One can argue that religious nationalism was a particular strand within the broader category of conservative nationalism (note that religious nationalism, in contrast to nationalist Islamism, is still a secular ideology even though it places Islam in a privileged position). One of the major proponents of religious nationalism was Ahmet Arvasi (1932–1988), who influenced the extreme right-wing MHP (Yıldız and Kizir 2023).[7] An intellectual who straddled religious nationalism and Islamism was Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983), who promoted a politicized version of religion within a statist Ottomanist and Turkish nationalist framework.[8] Kısakürek's influence on Milli Görüş political parties was palpable (even though Erbakan did not want Kısakürek to join his party so as not to be outshined by him). The Kemalist conception of nationalism against which Milli Görüş juxtaposed its own interpretation also changed direction to some extent. In the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of the Cold War and the need

to counter the Soviet Union, Kemalist elites began to reconceptualize Islam as an important aspect of Turkish identity (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008, 60). Milli Görüş and Kemalism shared this antileftist stance: in its early and formative phase, nationalist Islamism tapped into a Cold War environment that designated communism as a main, if not *the* main, political enemy.

The ambiguity in the term "Milli Görüş" itself is illustrative of this competing interpretation of "the nation": it is commonly translated as "National Outlook," but the term also conveys "an older meaning of *milli* in the sense of 'something belonging to a religious community' rather than implying the concept of a nation state" (Vömel 2021, 485). Milli Görüş nationalism evolved toward an Ottomanist position that treated the empire as the center of Muslim history and the 'prototype' for an Islamic system. The fusion of Islamism and nationalism meant that Turkey would be the global leader of the Muslim world.

The core ideological principle of nationalist Islamist parties was that religion and politics must merge. Islam enjoined political action;, and reform along Islamic lines would introduce a system more in tune with the authentic culture of the Turkish people. But Erbakan did not advocate the abolition of secularism because, whether he wished it or not, entering the political fray meant that he had to abide by the rules, at least formally or outwardly. And even though Erbakan desired the overthrow of the Kemalist establishment and the pro-Western civilizational orientation it stood for, he joined Bülent Ecevit's (1925–2006) CHP-led coalition government in 1974; and his political party, alongside others, was in government intermittently until 1978.

MNP and, subsequently, MSP ideology promoted the idea that political leadership must uphold the community-centered, unity-oriented values of Islam that were portrayed as antithetical to a West that stood for individualism and social division. The community-oriented approach also informed economic policy, and Erbakan stood for a state-centrist model favoring lower middle

class groups against the 'big capital' interests that had been hitherto associated with the CHP. Industrialization and social justice went hand in hand in Erbakan's viewpoint. His anticapitalist stance was coupled with anti-Semitic views that equated 'world Jewry' with exploitation at the global level. However, Erbakan's parties put equal or even more emphasis on spirituality against materialism, education, and culture. Conservative family values and the belief that women must fulfill the roles ascribed to them by an Islam interpreted along patriarchal lines complemented their worldview. Ultimately, even though Erbakan advocated for the fusion of the two separate goals of material and spiritual development, he was not successful in doing so. It has been pointed out that in practice the MSP focused little on religion and more on a political philosophy (Toprak 1981, 103), a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

The RP gradually grew in popularity from the 1980s and further increased its political representation in the 1990s. This was partly because the regime established by the 1980 military coup became more hospitable to 'Islam,' accepting that it had become an unavoidable element of the political and social scene and resolving to use it to buttress the state. The MSP was banned by the coup, as were other preexisting political parties, but the Islamists were not suppressed in the same way as the left (after all, the coup was fundamentally an antileftist one). In the 1980s, "the tarikats and other religious elements became influential in the military, the bureaucracy, education and government, dominating one wing of Turgut Özal's ruling (from 1983) ANAP" (Tapper 1991, 11). The junta also brought to the forefront the so-called Turkish-Islamic synthesis, the 1970s brainchild of a group called *Aydınlar Ocağı* (Intellectuals' Hearth), which was situated politically between the AP and the right-wing MHP and sought to "restore the 'rightful' place of Islam within official ideology" (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008, 61). The Turkish-Islamic synthesis was promoted by the state through education and culture with the aim of shaping Islam in a conservative, nationalist, and top-down way. It informed the writing of the 1982 Constitution (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008, 62). Embracing the Turkish-Islamic

synthesis did not indicate a shift of the Turkish state and the military in a pro-Islamist direction; on the contrary, its main purpose was to depoliticize Islam. Nevertheless, despite the uses to which the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was put by the military and the fact that the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was discredited by late 1980s in the face of a secularist backlash (Jenkins 2008, 149), it served to boost the RP indirectly because of the many links that existed between it and Turkish-Islamic synthesis intellectuals (Çakır 2004, 548).

The RP benefited in the 1980s from an expanding right-wing political space, enabled by the changes initiated by the 1980 coup leaders and the shift of the electorate in a conservative direction; only the CHP remained as a significant party of the center left by then (Kurdish parties were a separate issue). ANAP, which dominated on the right in the 1980s, had multiple links with Milli Görüş: for example, its leader Turgut Özal (1927–1993) was an MSP parliamentary candidate in 1977. (He later participated in Demirel's government.) ANAP was not an Islamist party—there is no evidence, for example, that Özal favored either the introduction of *shari'a* or the abolition of secularism (Jenkins 2008, 149)—but it treated Islam as a loose social and cultural 'glue' that held society together and put its stamp on Turkish identity. The RP competed with ANAP, which co-opted part of its constituency and also enjoyed *tarikat* support, as addressed above (White 2002, 132). The Islamist counterculture entered the mainstream in the 1990s, and there was an increasing Islamization of society and shift to the center right (Jenkins 2008, 214). As a result, the RP moved toward the political center (Tuğal 2009), thereby boosting its political appeal.

The RP scored major victories in the 1994 local elections and won a plurality of votes (21.38 percent) in the 1995 national parliamentary elections, resulting in Erbakan serving as prime minister in a coalition government for one year from 1996. During that time, Erbakan tried to implement aspects of his political doctrine. Domestically, this meant putting into place economic policies in support of smaller-scale businesses and other measures reflecting the

promises of his Just Order (*Adil Düzen*) manifesto. In the foreign policy realm, there was a stated aim for a customs union with Muslim states to replace the European Union free trade area and for closer relations with Middle Eastern countries such as Libya and Iran. In reality, the Erbakan government mostly focused on making Islam more prominent in the public realm and on emphasizing its symbolic significance (a fact indicating the paucity of its political program, a point to which I will return in the conclusion). For example, Erbakan wanted to construct a mosque on Taksim Square as an emblem of Islam conquering an important public space. Similarly, the government slightly changed working hours in response to the time of the fast-breaking meal during Ramadan (Öniş 2001, 286). Perhaps most importantly, the proposal for the removal of the headscarf ban in universities was opened for signature in the cabinet.

Following the overthrow of the RP-led government coalition as a result of military intervention in February 1997, the banning of the party in 1998, and the establishment of its successor, the FP, a series of ideological changes occurred, which were accelerated by the 2001 economic crisis. A split unfolded between the 'modernizing' and 'traditionalist' factions of the RP, which went their separate political ways. The political success of the AKP from that point onward and its ability to form a broad political coalition and to capture the middle ground of political opinion in Turkey partly rested on it distancing itself from Milli Görüş ideology and some of its core ideological principles. We will see below that it is disputed whether the Milli Görüş tradition was continued by the AKP or not, but as a political entity, the Erbakan political 'line' never went above the peak that it reached in the 1995 elections. The political iterations of Milli Görüş that have appeared since the late 1990s, mainly the SP and other smaller parties, have shrunk in terms of electoral support.

Renewalist Islamism

Similar to nationalist Islamism, renewalist Islamism also emerged and evolved from the 1970s onward within the broader context of right-wing, conservative ideologies and political parties in Turkey, the preexisting network of Islamic, informal social and cultural religious organizations, and a wider Islamic space that promoted a conservative and religious conception of nationalism. However, more than a product, renewalist Islamism constituted a reaction to all the above and, in particular, a reaction to Milli Görüş and the nationalist approach to Islamism that it represented (Çetinsaya 2004, 451). In contradistinction to Milli Görüş thinking, which was expressly antileftist—and while remaining antileftist in their political intent[9]—some renewalist Islamist strands were influenced by socialist thought, which had entered the mainstream of Turkish cultural and social life in the 1960s (Berktay 1990, 3).[10] An important difference between nationalist and renewalist Islamism is that the former led to the creation of political parties that actively participated in the political process, whereas the latter did not always do so, its political thinking often remaining at the abstract level.

There are common elements between renewalist Turkish Islamism and Islamic thought in the very late Ottoman period—specifically the interpretation of Islam put forward by intellectuals such as Namık Kemal (1840–1888) and Mehmet Akif (1873–1936). These thinkers, among others, had initiated a modernist rereading of the foundational texts in order to reform Islam. Similarly to the Salafi approach of Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), they offered a new method and a new approach to Islam: for example, Kemal suggested a modernist and even democratic reading of the Qur'an (Mardin 2000, 283–336).[11] While some Young Ottomans read democratic principles into *shari'a* and promoted rationalist and modernist ideas akin to natural law in European and Christian thought (Türköne 1994, 93–143), others, such as Ali Suavi (1839–1878), gave a conservative interpretation of the texts (Türköne 1994, 271–282).[12] They were concerned with the survival of the Muslims

and the Ottoman Empire, and this led to their protonationalism, but they were also pan-Islamists.

Despite the existence of the late Ottoman modernist Islamism, however, the impetus for the birth of renewalist Islamism came from abroad rather than through reconnecting with that historical legacy (Türköne 1994, 14).[13] Islamists became more internationalist in their outlook after the 1960s (Çiğdem 2004, 28). A resurgence of religion occurred globally in the 1970s and the 1980s, affecting not just the Muslim world but also the Christian, Hindu, and Jewish ones. The 1970s was the decade of Islamist mobilization in the Arab Middle East, Iran, and South Asia. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a seminal event in driving it further forward, and although its impact on Turkey may not have been direct, it contributed to the politicization of Islam and the changing of its nature among some groups.[14]

Renewalist Islamism owed a lot to a wave of translations of Arabic and South Asian language Islamist texts into Turkish, which had already commenced in the late 1950s, spread through the religious publishing houses in the 1960s, and mushroomed in the 1970s (Yıldız 2023). Muslim Brotherhood and Abul Al'a Mawdudi's (1903–1979) texts were particularly influential (Kara 2016, 2:501–545). The translated works created a ferment of debate within youth organizations, especially among student groups, and captured their imagination. Discussions were carried out on the pages of magazines, each of which was associated with a prominent Islamist thinker or trend (Yıldız 2023).

Those whom I label as "renewalist" Islamists hold widely divergent positions on religion and politics—and not all renewalist Islamic thinkers are Islamists, as we shall see below—but they share one essential characteristic: an individual, novel, or iconoclastic rereading of Islam that goes against the consensus imposed by 'the community,' the leader, and by history. They advocate for a return to the Qur'an and other original religious 'texts' (I define 'text' broadly

here) and seek to reinterpret them, typically using the method of *ijtihad* [independent reasoning or interpretation]. Renewalists reject traditionalist Islam, which includes Sufism, in favor of ridding Islam of the historical accretions that they believe distorted its original message. The aim in such cases is 'restoration' rather than renewal, which makes the term "renewalism" problematic, though it is still more comprehensive than others.

In the Turkish context, renewalist Islamists represented a reaction to the nationalism of Milli Görüş, as already mentioned, and to traditionalist interpretations advanced by some of the *tarikat*s, especially the Nakşibendis. They advocated for a recentering of Islamic perspectives away from Turkey and as a result often held anti-Ottomanist views. But if renewalist Islamists went directly to the text and other fundamental sources of the religion to construct their political ideology, they differed widely on *how* they read the text and *what* they read in it. Just as elsewhere in the Muslim world, rereadings of the original texts produced authoritarian, radical, violent, liberal, and even secular interpretations.

Some readings were authoritarian in the sense that the return to the text, and its reinterpretation through *ijtihad*, was carried out with an illiberal intent. One such example was the standpoint of the Nesil group that became powerful within the *Diyanet* (Lord 2018, 105). Hayrettin Karaman (b. 1934) was an important figure in the Nesil group (Bora 2017, 494–496; Aktay 2004a; İnal and Alagöz 2016): his conception of democracy was influenced by Mawdudi, and he became associated with the AKP, partly through his illiberal understanding of democracy (Guida 2010, 362–365). Separate from the Nesil group, there exists a Turkish Salafi trend, influenced directly or indirectly by Wahhabi doctrine and other literalist interpretations of Islam (Hammond 2017). In terms of the type of political action for which they advocate, some renewalist strands are also statist, campaigning for reform through the initiative of the state as well as through the actions of the public (Kayacan 2020, 133).[15]

On the other end of the spectrum, and again relying on a direct reading of the Qur'an, is a range of radical interpretations of Islam and politics. What I mean by "radical" here is antiestablishment and iconoclastic but not necessarily liberal or democratic—in fact, radical interpretations often engender (though sometimes unintentionally) an authoritarian and even hierarchical approach to politics. In the specific Turkish context, radicals, as I understand them, are anti-Western. Generalizing about these positions is problematic, and intellectuals such as Hamza Türkmen (b. 1953), Atasoy Müftüoğlu (b. 1942), and Ali Bulaç (b. 1951) represent very different traditions of thought, but they all stand for radical reinterpretations in their own way. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 galvanized a turn to radical politics among many Sunni Islamist thinkers (Elhan 2016), and it also had an impact on Shi'a Jafari thought (Yeler 2010, 337–338). One case of a radical thinker whose political approach was influenced by the Iranian Revolution, at least partly, was Ercüment Özkan (1938–1995). Özkan was opposed to Sufism, preached that Islam should form the basis of politics, and argued that the key to bringing about an Islamic political order was to realize that the Qur'an's original message has been distorted by generations of commentators (Çakır 2002, 199–201). Another example, one of a different type of thinker, was Said Çekmegil (1921–2004), who became a leading figure in the so-called Malatya School of radical Islamism. He argued that pious Muslims needed to enter into the realm of politics or risk abandoning it to the irreligious (Bora 2017, 455). Some of these radical readings have brought forward understandings of Islam that favor violence as a method of achieving political objectives; one case is the Hizbullah group (Jenkins 2008, 185–195). Finally, diametrically opposed to radical political interpretations but on another spectrum are radical *apolitical* ones; one example is the *uzletçiler* [literally 'those who withdraw'] who, on the basis of a reading of Sayyid Qutb's (1906–1966) critique of modernity, believed that Muslims must retreat from social life (Bora 2017, 456).

Renewalist readings have also produced liberal or rationalist interpretations of Islam, with "historicism" being a distinct and significant such school of thought in Turkey (Demircan 2019; Öztürk 2013).[16] Historicism is a theological school—one based on renovation, rationalism, and reform—going back to Qur'an and relying on *ijtihad* (Kırbaşoğlu 2019, 95). It attributes prime importance to the historical context in interpreting the Qur'an. In its political implications, it is universalist and claims that a rational analysis of Islamic piety requires moral, political opposition (Bacik 2021, 22, 92–101). Rationalists are also interested in how Islam applies to contemporary political problems—for example, the lack of democracy—and they critique *shari'a* law and the type of Islamization that is based on it (Bacik 2021, 23, 62).

The historicist school's political agenda is a progressive or democratic politics through a liberal interpretation of Islam. Some historicist strands are left-leaning and suggest a fusion of socialism and Islamism, privileging social justice and anti-imperialism; a prominent example is the Anti-Kapitalist Müslümanlar [anticapitalist Muslim] group, which revolves predominantly around İhsan Eliaçık (b. 1961). But historicism, and liberal Islamism more generally, can also prompt a call for the separation of religion and politics. The critique is that Islam became too state-friendly historically and that the decline of rationalism in Islamic history was associated with the politicization of the religion (Bacik 2021, 136–137). Linking Islam with power leads to corruption, and some critics speak of the "profanization" of Islamic groups such as the RP, ANAP, and the AKP that was caused by their moving close to power (Kırbaşoğlu 2019, 97–98). It is a logical progression that historicist readings merge with apolitical or secularist positions, so in this sense, some renewalist strands can no longer be categorized as Islamist, according to the definition in this chapter.[17]

The Case of the AKP

The AKP was the product of a fusion of several right-wing political traditions in Turkey, some of which were Islamist, but—on the basis of my definition here—the AKP is not an Islamist party, even though it includes many Islamist strands and individuals, several of whom are in positions of leadership.[18] The AKP is an umbrella organization under which are gathered many different and often contradictory tendencies, and furthermore, it has changed considerably over its more than 20 years' existence, with different strands gaining the upper hand at different times. At its inception, the AKP inherited the legacy of the Milli Görüş tradition and was in some ways the successor party to the RP. However, as we saw, the party was established by the 'modernizing' faction of the RP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b. 1954) and Abdullah Gül (b. 1950), in opposition to its 'traditionalists.' This faction distanced itself from key Milli Görüş doctrines and the label itself, rejecting its anticapitalist and, for a while at least, its anti-Western tendencies. As a result, the AKP attracted political elites and voters from the entire spectrum of the right.[19] It is no accident that the so-called Anatolian tigers—an ill-defined collection of nonmetropolitan, exporting, enterprising, mid- and small-sized business groups—transferred their support from other right-wing parties to the AKP.

Popular preference for the application of *shari'a* has been traditionally low in Turkey, as previously noted. By the time of the AKP's arrival in power, it was clear that—at least through this particular indicator—Islamism was not an election winner. The AKP sought to undermine and ultimately overthrow the Kemalist establishment, whose mainstay was the military and parts of the bureaucracy. But it also acknowledged that secular values had become entrenched in Turkish political preferences and did not seek to abolish secularism as a legal principle that separated religion and state and to introduce an Islamic system.

While accepting secularism was there to stay, the AKP presented itself as the champion of the Turkish 'people,' who were believed to be naturally pious and whose rights had been trodden on by the Kemalist establishment. Adopting a long-standing Islamist position that is also, at the

same time, a familiar Orientalist trope (an irony for a party that presents countering Orientalism as a key mission), the AKP identified the 'will of the people' with 'Islam.' How this 'Islam' is interpreted is in the eye of the beholder—in this case, the party that governs on behalf of the Islamic majority. The AKP has a majoritarian conception of democracy, without the complementary side of respecting minority rights and individual freedoms. An authoritarian (and populist) politics is the inevitable product of such an interpretation, especially when 'the people' turn against your political choices.

For the AKP, Islam must infuse the social, cultural, and even private realms rather than the political realm; it aims to create a 'pious generation' rather than to establish an Islamic political system. 'Good Muslims' must be in control. Symbolic moves such as the turning of Ayasofya museum into a mosque in the year 2020 acquire high significance within this context. The banning of the theory of evolution from school curricula is a good indication of what the spread of "Islamic values" in society entails (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017). Safeguarding the family and the upholding of religious values that buttress various hierarchies (between men and women, older and younger generations, leaders and the led), are key objectives. In terms of Turkish history, the AKP promotes a recognition of the Islamic element in the Ottoman Empire, through its emphasis on Sultan Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876–1909) as a hero, for example, and a neo-Ottomanist position that considers the empire as the pinnacle of Islamic history (Yavuz 2020). In international affairs, the AKP wishes for the Islamic world—with Turkey at its head—to claim its rightful position of power and legitimacy, and it supports movements such as Hamas that combine Islamist ideology with anti-imperialism. Despite the emphasis by the AKP in its first decade on the "dialogue of civilizations," 'Islam' and 'the West' are conceived in essentialist terms.

The AKP has always synthesized its Islamic inclinations with Turkish nationalism but of course the blend between the two, and their respective interpretations, have changed and evolved over

the years of the party's existence. The rivalry with Kemalism centered on contradictory understandings of nationalism, away from the former's ethnic, cultural, language-based definition and in favor of one that embraced the religious Sunni identity of the Turks. This enabled the AKP to make several openings toward the Kurds until 2015 (for a full exposition of Alevi Republican history and the associated politics of recognition, see Walton and İlengiz, chap. 23, this volume).[20] However, with the decline of the AKP's electoral fortunes—and the growing Kurdish threat in Syria—came the AKP's alliance with the nationalist MHP in 2015 and a shift toward a more conventional, ethnically based Turkish nationalist position. Clearly, this nationalist shift has pushed the AKP even further away from Islamism, in its political sense, and toward a concentration on moral and spiritual issues, the upholding of Islamic 'values' in the social and cultural sense, and their instrumentalization for political advantage. The type of 'Islam' advocated for by the AKP has become more exclusivist in identity terms, with the result that the West-East binary (and the related imagery of a country and a movement persecuted by outsiders) in its political rhetoric has hardened.

The AKP governed until 2013 with the support of the Gülen movement, one of the offshoots of the Nurcu movement. Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941) is a staunch nationalist and an Ottomanist, a 'statist' thinker who was positively inclined toward the military and was even in favor of the February 28, 1997, soft coup, as we saw above (he was, nevertheless, indicted as an enemy of *laicism* in 2000 and had gone into exile shortly before the indictment; Findley 2010, 386–387). The Gülen Movement is modernist and 'scientist' but also conformist, hierarchical, oppressive, cult-like, and opposed to the participation of women in politics (Toprak 2009; Bora 2017, 430–437). It attempted to take control of state institutions, such as the judiciary and municipalities, from within and to expand its influence over education. Gülenists are widely assumed to have led the attempted coup of July 2016, which sought the overthrow of the AKP government, but even so, the group does not aim to seize political power directly. Moreover, it continues to rely

on spreading the 'correct' Islamic values through society rather than to reform the political system along Islamist lines and to abolish secularism. Ultimately, neither Gülen nor the AKP are proper Islamist entities, and the rivalry between them is about power and control rather than ideological differences.

Conclusion

Islamist movements are at least partial reflections of the contexts in which they emerge, and these contexts, more often than not, are framed by the territorial boundaries of nation-states. The nationalist Islamist movement, the bigger and more politically active of the two types of Islamist strands in Turkey, was the product of a fusion between Islamist ideology and versions of Turkish nationalism. Milli Görüş political parties that formed around Necmettin Erbakan in the 30 years from 1970 were influenced by conservative political parties, which used Islam in other ways, and by the Nakşibendi *tarikat*s, which did not participate directly in politics. They were also close with a strand of conservative and religious nationalism that challenged the Kemalist understanding of Turkish identity. "Renewalist Islamism," an umbrella term comprising diverse views on how Islam should be interpreted and applied to politics, also emerged under these same domestic conditions, but it was above all a reaction, fertilized by outside influences, to the nationalist Islamist movement.[21] There existed common elements and shared views between nationalist and renewalist Islamisms, and between Islamist groups and non-Islamist actors that used religion for political purposes. In reality, the different group categories blend into a continuum and are not sharply delineated.

Renewalist Islamism had considerable intellectual influence on political debates in Turkey but remained marginal in its political impact, which was indirect or even negligible. Milli Görüş was certainly the winning formula when it came to the entry of Islam into the political process. But in the case of the latter, too, Islamism remained a minority position. Islamism in Turkey

has failed in its core mission of restructuring politics, even though it has succeeded in informing the political process with religious imagery and imbuing society with conservative social values. This was the case for a variety of reasons. One was that the secular, Kemalist structures within which Islamist movements operated in Turkey throughout their history restricted Islamists' ability to hold and to express Islamist positions. But if fear was one reason, another was that Kemalism had succeeded in imbuing the Turkish citizenry with the view that, at least in constitutional terms, religion must be separate from the state. Despite the much-vaunted "retraditionalization" of Turkish society, abolishing secularism would be hard to accomplish.

Another reason for the failure of Islamism in Turkey, which the chapter hinted at, was the inability of Islamist movements to articulate a political program, apart from in slogans (Aktay 2004b, 15). This became evident in the paucity of concrete Islamist policy proposals on how to restructure the political sphere, even when Erbakan held the reins of power. This was not only because his government was hemmed in by the establishment but also because Islamism is inherently unable to offer such proposals. Despite the declared intention of Islamizing politics and even when they had the opportunity to do so, Islamists in Turkey concentrated more on cultural, moral, and social issues and made symbolic gestures to highlight the role of Islam in public life. One could therefore argue that Turkish Islamism constituted one more instance of the failure of political Islam that is evident in other parts of the world (Roy 1994). It follows that Turkish Islamism, as defined in this chapter, is not only weak but is in practice difficult to distinguish from non-Islamist political actors that harness religion to their political purposes, such as the AKP.

Irrespective of the label we attach to it, it is clear that the AKP's combination of a religious, symbolic politics with an (until recently) thriving pro-free market economic set of policies has been the successful formula for the incorporation of religion in Turkey's public sphere. Erdoğan, whatever his personal ideological preferences, has had no reason to alter the

constitutional structures established by the republic's founders—especially given the AKP's focus on retraditionalizing Turkish society and building a 'pious generation.' Then again, the visibility of religion must not be conflated with the intensification of its role (Turan 1991, 35), and the future does not bode well for the construction of this new generation. Twenty years of an 'Islamic-oriented' government have caused a growing number of young people to become areligious, deist, and even antireligious. It has been claimed that the AKP has a "problem with youth" (Alemdaroğlu 2018, 2021; Lüküslü 2016). The jury is still out about the future of Islam as a religion, let alone of Islam as a political ideology in Turkey.

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[1] My definition is narrower than many other authors,' including, for example, Andrew F. March's (2015, 104): "Political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life". For discussions and definitions of Islamism, see Ayubi (1991), Bayat (2013), Roy (1994, 2004), Kara (2017, 18), Türköne (1994, 24–32), and Hashemi (2021).

[2] Türköne (1994, 24–32) proposes a useful set of distinctions between Islam as a religion and Islamism as an ideology: Islam is a "preideology," whereas Islamism is an ideology; Islam is theocentric, whereas Islamism is anthropocentric; Islamism involves returning to the original sources of Islam; in contrast to traditional Islam, Islamism sees other ideologies, not other religions, as its rivals; and Islamism was propagated by a new intellectual class that used new means of mass communication.

[3] This was a point of rupture, but there were continuities, too, with developments in the late Ottoman period and in particular with the modernist interpretations of Islam in its

final decades. Some illustrative examples among the extensive literature discussing these issues are Toprak (1981) on *din-u devlet* [religion and state] in the Ottoman period, Hanioğlu (2008) on the Committee of Union and Progress's approaches to and reforms of religion, and Dressler (2015) on Ziya Gökalp and Islam.

[4] The center-right ideology of the DP was founded on the principles of private enterprise, majoritarian democracy, clientelist populism, and a Western-oriented foreign policy (Hale and Özbudun 2010, xviii).

[5] There were international as well as domestic reasons for the creation of the MNP at that particular point. The defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967 and the anti-Zionist and anti-American wave it created (Kara 2016, 2:521), and the global rise of religious and identity politics were contributing factors. The international influences on renewalist Islamism that I discuss in the next section also pertained to nationalist Islamism but to a lesser degree.

[6] Taşkın (2007, 387) discusses "nationalist conservatism" rather than "conservative nationalism" and argues that the former was superseded by Islamism in the 1990s.

[7] For Ahmet Arvasi, the politicization of Islam meant creating a political party, and "a political party based on Islam comes to mean the destruction of Islam's universal and supra-party characteristics" (Yıldız and Kizir 2023, 84).

[8] Kısakürek is often discussed in the literature alongside another famous intellectual, Nurettin Topçu (1909–1975), but they were in fact quite different. The former was an Islamist for whom Islam was as an ideology, whereas the latter was not; for Topçu, Islam offered a sense of morality in politics rather than providing prescriptions and rules for politics (Köseoğlu 2021, 6).

[9] I am grateful to Tunahan Yıldız for pointing out this fine distinction.

[10] Kara (2004, 37) argues that the influence of Marxism after World War II made Islamism more internationalist (as opposed to being concerned with national independence) and more political.

[11] There were other important differences. The late Ottomans were concerned with restructuring the state, whereas Abduh and other modernists were concerned with reforming Islam (Karpat 1972, 262).

[12] The Young Ottomans used *shariʻa* as a slogan for justice against imperialism and identified secularism with autocracy and Islam as the means of resisting a centralizing, bureaucratic state. Both the Young Ottomans and the 'bureaucratic centralizers' drew on traditions of 'the West,' which indicates once again how simplistic it is to use the term without specifying *which* West.

[13] This was one outcome of the 'interruption' in Islamic thought in the early republic that was mentioned earlier.

[14] The boundaries between nationalist and renewalist Islamism were sometimes fluid, particularly when it came to influences from abroad. For example, many of the younger members of the Milli Görüş movement were sympathetic toward the Muslim Brotherhood (Kara 2016, 2:524). There were similarities between Qutb and Kısakürek (Kara 2016, 2:532). The MSP was sympathetic toward the Iranian Revolution, though the Nurcus, Işıkçılar, and other Nakşibendis were not (Gundogan 2003, 7–9).

[15] It is possible to place the Nurcu and their many offshoots in the renewalist camp because the movement that Said Nursi initiated was centered on the text, and he opposed Sufism and reliance on the word of the *shaykh*. But the Nurcu were not Islamists, as shown by their relationship with political parties, outlined above.

[16] Öztürk (2013, 193) points out that the followers of Mawdudi and Qutb see Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) as an infidel, but Milli Görüş has shown some interest in his work. As is

often the case, ideological antipathies are more intense between 'kin' schools of thought.

[17] Interestingly, they are close to Mustafa Kemal's early discourses on Islam, which can be said to have common elements with a renewalist modernist reading.

[18] The debate on whether the AKP is an Islamist party has raged since its establishment in 2001. A number of important studies on political Islam in Turkey describe it as an Islamist party (see, for example, Eligur 2010). The party itself eschewed the label, calling itself a "conservative democratic" party. It has been described in the literature as a post-Islamist party.

[19] Others see the 2002 elections as showing the further marginalization of the center-right tradition in favor of Islamist and nationalist parties. AKP's distancing from Erbakan's traditionalist Islamist strand contributed to this process (Açikel 2003, 188).

[20] The AKP also made openings toward the Alevi population in Turkey, but I am unable to cover the Alevi issue in a meaningful way within the scope of this short chapter.

[21] Influences from outside Turkey were also important for the formation of Milli Görüş but to a lesser degree.