CHAPTER TWO
The Islamic Landscape in Turkey

Turkey has a complex and extraordinarily rich religious tradition, ranging from pre-Islamic practices to mainstream Sunni Islam, from small minority groups of Orthodox Christians, as well as Jews, to a range of Alevis, Shi’a, and other sects. Turkey is, of course, an overwhelmingly Muslim society, but 80 years of a rigorously secular republic have placed religion in the realm of private practice for most Turks. The emergence of a more visible “religiosity” on the Turkish scene, especially over the past decade, is a product of many influences: the waning of the Kemalist legacy, a rediscovery of traditional practices, an expanding network of religious schools and social-welfare institutions, and the process of democratization and the rise of a more openly religious middle class. It is also the visible product of large-scale migration from the countryside to the cities in recent decades, with a consequent movement of more-traditional, more outwardly religious people to Turkey’s modern, urbanized west.¹

The role of Islam in Turkish political leadership was a contested issue even in the Selçuk and Ottoman periods. Thus, the more direct confrontation between Islam and secularism in republican Turkey has historical roots.² From the late 17th century onward, with the erosion

¹ This chapter builds on Ian O. Lesser, “Turkey: ‘Recessed’ Islamic Politics and Convergence with the West,” op. cit.

of the power of the sultan, the religious leadership (the ulema) became steadily more influential, and high-ranking mufti became central actors in Ottoman politics and foreign affairs.\(^3\) The balance of political and religious authority shifted again in the later years of the Ottoman Empire, as restive Arab populations outside Anatolia came to see the caliphate as part of a Turkish colonial empire, and as the Ottoman regime and liberal reformers pushed the country toward modernization, Western practices, and de facto secularization.\(^4\)

 Atatürk’s abolition of the caliphate in 1924 and the enactment of a series of sweeping secularization measures greatly reinforced a trend toward secularization that had much earlier roots but remains a contested issue in Turkish society. Analysts of political Islam in Turkey often cite the general subordination of religious to political authority in Ottoman and post-Ottoman Turkey as an argument against the potential for the emergence of a religious state in modern Turkey.\(^5\)

 In recent decades, reformist thinking has been gaining ground among Turkish theologians. There is an argument that the globalization and modernization of Turkish society have produced a demand for modern Islam. Beginning with the Nur movement, religious schools of thought have emerged that do not see conflict between reason and revelation and have internalized concepts of political democracy, religious toleration, rule of law, and a free-market economy. This, too, makes Turkey different from the other countries of the Middle East, where modernist interpretations of Islam have found it difficult to make inroads against entrenched religious conservatism.

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\(^4\) Ergil, op. cit., p. 5.

Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics

Religion and politics in Turkey are influenced by the country’s ethnic and demographic situation. Throughout the Ottoman period, until as late as the 1920s, the state was a diverse patchwork of ethnic and religious communities. In the first parliament of the Ottoman Empire, which convened in 1877 during the reign of Abdulhamit II, the elected lower house (*Meclis-i Mebusan* (Assembly of Representatives)) consisted of 69 Muslims and 46 non-Muslims. By this measure, modern republican Turkey is actually more homogeneous and less cosmopolitan than its imperial predecessor. Orthodox Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims are dwindling minorities in today’s Turkey. That said, the secular nature of the republic offers the remnants of these once very large communities a relatively stable, if sometimes uneasy, environment.

The continuing potential of minority issues to serve as flashpoints for religious and nationalist sentiment was dramatically underscored by the 2007 murder in Istanbul of Hrant Dink, a prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist and intellectual. The murder spurred an outpouring of sentiment by moderate Turks, deeply troubled by an example of what many see as rising intolerance and xenophobia in Turkey (trends witnessed in parts of Europe as well). The daily newspaper *Vatan* reported that “it has been alleged that the aggressor shouted, ‘I killed an Armenian,’ when running away from the attack scene.” In response, 5,000 demonstrators marched from Taksim Square to the murder scene and shouted, “We are all Hrant Dinks, we are all Armenians.”

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6 The upper house (*Meclis-i Ayan* (Assembly of Elites)) was composed of 26 members selected by the sultan. The breakdown of the upper house’s composition is not available. İlk Parlemento, Geçmişten Günümüze TBMM, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, at http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tarihce/kb2.htm (as of March 21, 2008).


8 “Hepimiz Ermeniyiz,” *Hürriyet*, January 20, 2007. The killer’s social environment and link to the nationalist network have subsequently been uncovered, and it is clear that the murder was motivated by nationalism, not religion. Although there are reports that the killer shouted, “I killed a non-Muslim,” the possible Turkish words for that (*gayrimüslim* or *gavur*) are also routinely used to mean “non-Turkish minority” or simply “minority.” In common Turkish parlance, minority refers to Armenians, Greeks, and Jews only.
Although ethnic Turks constitute a majority of the country’s population, Turkey remains an ethnically diverse society. Kurds represent about one-fifth of the population, and the issue of Kurdish integration remains the leading internal social—and security—issue facing the country. Kurds predominate in southeast Anatolia, with large communities outside Turkey in northern Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Yet a majority of Turkey’s Kurds now live outside their traditional areas, as the result of large-scale migration to urbanized western Turkey in recent decades. This pattern of demographic change has been reinforced by the strains of a 15-year insurgency and counterinsurgency in the Kurdish areas of the southeast.

Beyond ethnic identification, many Turks can and do trace their origins to areas outside Anatolia, whether in the Caucasus, the Balkans, Central Asia, or elsewhere in the Levant. These affiliations have come to play a more prominent role in Turkish politics and foreign policy in recent decades and have become the basis for lobbies on Chechnya, Bosnia, Azerbaijan, and the status of the Turkmen in Iraq. Kemalist ideology, apart from being vigorously secular, left little room for these ethnic identifications. For Atatürk, the Turkish identity was a question of location rather than ethnicity: Turks were those living within Turkey who called themselves Turks. But in popular perception, the line between Turkish nationalism and ethnic and religious identity has often been blurred.

Ethnicity, regionalism, and religious politics interact in several ways in contemporary Turkey. More traditional and visible Islamic practices are common in rural and poorer areas of the country, particularly in the southeast. Migration to the cities has changed the composition of the urban areas in the west, which now include large areas inhabited by poor, more-traditional, and more-religious populations. Religious parties have done well in the southeast and among migrants to the cities, often outcompeting Kurdish nationalist parties. This was certainly a factor in the electoral success of the Islamist Refah Party in

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1995, when the party garnered 21.5 percent of the vote and led a coalition, as well as its successor, Fazilet (Virtue Party), and more recently, the AKP. The more-radical currents in Islamic politics such as Turkish Hezbollah are also more visible in the urban areas of southeastern and eastern Anatolia, where it is often alleged that such groups were supported by Ankara as part of the counterinsurgency strategy against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the 1990s.

The PKK and other Kurdish separatist movements have, in general, been oriented toward the secular left, rather than the Islamic right. Religious extremism among Turkey’s Kurds has never been a comfortable fit with Kurdish nationalism. At another level, however, the perception of disenfranchisement and alienation among many Kurds, especially in the southeast and among recent arrivals to urban Turkey, has driven substantial numbers toward religious movements as a political alternative. Kurds predominate among those apprehended in connection with the Istanbul bombings of November 2003. Certain areas of Turkey besides the southeast also have a reputation for religious conservatism. Konya, a traditional center of Sufi activism, is a leading example.

The Management of Islam

In the Turkish Republic, secularism does not mean just the separation of state and religion, as it does in most Western societies. The Kemalist state, drawing on Ottoman practice as well the French model of laïcité, insisted on the control of religion by state institutions. The republic inherited the mechanisms for the monitoring and regulation of religion that had been established by the Ottomans. The instrument for regulating Islam is the Diyaret Isleri Baskanligi, or Directorate of Religious Affairs, an office that reports to the prime minister and has a budget larger than that of most ministries. The Diyaret is the successor organization to the Ottoman office of Sheikh ul-Islam, but it differs in that the management of religious endowments was separated from the Ministry of Religious Affairs established by the first republican parlia-
ment and made the responsibility of a separate organization, a general
directorate under the prime minister.

It is important to note that the Diyanet manages only the Sunni
branch of Islam. It does not serve or organize other branches or other
religions—which shows that the Turkish state, although secular, is not
equidistant from all religions. Christianity and Judaism are not man-
gaged by a dedicated branch of government such as the Diyanet. They
are self-governing but subject to Turkish laws and regulations, particular-
ly those pertaining to minorities.

The Diyanet has two functions: the administration of Tur-
key’s 77,000 mosques and the production of religious knowledge—
“explaining Islam in the best way to people,” as a Diyanet official put
it. The Diyanet supervises the muftis, religious scholars who give legal
opinions. Although religious officials are not supposed to involve them-
selves in politics, these opinions inevitably touch on controversial mat-
ters, such as the use of the headscarf. The Diyanet’s position is that there
is a religious requirement for women to cover themselves, especially at
prayer, but that it is not a high priority in terms of religious duties.10

There is a mufti in each of Turkey’s 81 provinces and 900 dis-
tricts. All muftis and imams are state employees. They are educated
in the Imam-Hatip schools, state religious-education institutions, and
in any of the country’s 20 faculties of theology. At the provincial level,
muftis, preachers, and imams hold monthly meetings to discuss and
prepare Friday sermons, although an imam can prepare his sermons
alone if he wishes.

Within the Diyanet, a Religious Affairs High Board issues high-
level decisions. Members of the board are selected by a group of del-
egates comprising professors of theology, muftis, and heads of Diya-
net departments. The Diyanet also has a strong international presence,
aimed at servicing the religious needs of Turks abroad. As of 2007,
there were 528 imams in Germany and 90 in France, selected and pre-
pared by the Diyanet in conjunction with German and French authori-
ties. (The preparation includes instruction in the host country’s lan-

10 That has to be the Diyanet’s position, since the Quran does instruct women to cover and
mentions the headscarf in Nur 24:31.
guage and culture.) Overall, there are Diyanet-selected imams in 34 countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia.11

Sufi Brotherhoods

Sufi orders, or brotherhoods (tarikatlar), such as the Bektaşi and the Safavi at one time competed with the Ottomans for the political control of eastern Anatolia, and Bektaşi Sufism eventually became the official order of the Janissaries. Although incorporated into the Sunni mainstream in Turkey, the sect maintained elements of heterodox Shi’a belief. Sufi orders have survived as important religious and social networks in modern Turkey, despite being outlawed and driven underground in the republican period. Two prominent tarikatlar, the Nakşibendi and the Kadiri, remain active on the Islamic scene, and their lodges often intersect with other business and political networks. The late Prime Minister and President Turgut Özal himself was a supporter of the İskenderpasa Nakşibendi Sufi order, and he promoted businessmen of Anatolian origin who had close ties to those circles.12

Since the 1950s, the tarikatlar have enjoyed a resurgence, including the formation of new orders, some of which have taken an active, if indirect, role in politics. (The Sufi resurgence was related to the change in the country’s political leadership in 1950 from the Kemalist CHP to the conservative Democratic Party under Adnan Menderes, whose government was more tolerant of Islamic traditions.) Of Turkey’s Sufi orders, the Nakşibendi has been the most visible, with political figures from Prime Ministers Özal to Erdoğan linked to the movement. There are more than a score of Nakşibendi groups in Turkey, each with its own sheikh, who is the undisputed leader of the group. Under the Ottomans, the Sufi orders had an umbrella organization, the Majlis al-Mesheikh (Council of Sheikhs), which was controlled by the state,

11 Interview with Sabit Şimşek, Ankara, June 2007.
but this organization, together with the tarikatlar, was abolished by the republic.\textsuperscript{13}

The Nakşibendi are known for their tolerance and flexibility. Members divide life into two spheres: the private and the religious. This leaves room for enjoying life. Some members have been known to indulge in moderate drinking in private; Özal, for example, drank at official dinners where alcohol was served. Erdoğan has reportedly been associated with the İsmail Ağa section of the Nakşibendi (named after the Istanbul mosque that bears the founder’s name), a stricter branch. (Some people close to Erdoğan deny that he is affiliated with tarikatlar in any way; of course, Sufi orders are illegal in Turkey.) Abdullah Gül and former Speaker of Parliament Bülent Arınç also have Nakşibendi backgrounds.

The Nakşibendi were at the root of political Islam in Turkey. The first Turkish Islamist parties, Necmettin Erbakan’s National Order Party (\textit{Milli Nizam Partisi} (MNP)) and the National Salvation Party (\textit{Milli Selamet Partisi} (MSP)) were established through the promotion and support of Sheikh Mehmet Zahid Kotku, the master of the Nakşibendi Khalidi tarikat centered at the İskenderpaşa mosque in Istanbul. Upon his death in 1980, Kotku was succeeded by his son-in-law, Professor Esad Coşan, who emphasized the strength of Islam as culture. In stressing “cultural” Islam, Özal diverged from Erbakan, who, in Coşan’s view, had “excessively” politicized religion.\textsuperscript{14}

In the 1980s, many Nakşibendi joined Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party. Özal’s brother, Korkut Özal, had created a political organization that brought together conservative and religious forces, the \textit{Birlik Vakfı} (Unity Foundation). These connections carried over into the AKP. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended Sheikh Kotku’s seminary at İskenderpasa and gravitated toward the circle of Kotku and his successor Coşan. The political importance of the Sufi brotherhood,

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Süleyman Derin, Istanbul, June 2007.

\textsuperscript{14} Şerif Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today,” \textit{Journal of International Affairs}, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000, pp. 158–159. See also “Biography of Prof. Dr. Mahmud Esad Coşan,” at http://gumushkhanawidargah.8m.com/friday/mec.html (as of March 21, 2008).
according to Şerif Mardin, lies in these relationships. Brotherhoods are based on patronage, friendships, and associations, not on institutional influence. Usually they do not advertise what they do. Their mission is understood.15

Religious Movements

Economic and political liberalization during the administration of Turgut Özal facilitated the development of a “religious market” in Turkey. Nakşibendi orders, the Fethullah Gülen movement, and the political National View movement of Necmettin Erbakan competed over the meaning and proper role of Islam in Turkish society.16 The Gülen movement has its roots in the Nurculuk movement of Said Nursi (1873–1960), who is best known as the author of the Risale-i Nur, the “Message of Light,” a 6,000-page commentary on the Quran. He argued that the time of the “jihad of the sword” was over, and that we are now in the era of the “jihad of the word,” meaning a reasoned attempt to reconcile science and rationalism with Islam. Nursi defended the rights of Armenians and Greeks in Turkey and reached out to Christian leaders. In 1950, he sent his collected works to Pope Pius XII and received in reply a personal letter of thanks. In the same way, in 1953, Nursi visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul to seek cooperation between Muslims and Christians against atheism.17

Fethullah Gülen reinvented the Nur movement as “Turkish Islam.” He departed from Nursi’s emphasis on individual transformation and focused on the public sphere and on turning Islam into

Islamic networks and social capital. The Gülen movement is active in promoting harmony among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and it sponsors a variety of fora for interfaith dialogue. A web of organizations propagates Gülen's vision of Islam. These include Fatih University in Istanbul and an extensive network of schools, hospitals, and charitable and media organizations, including the mass-circulation newspaper Zaman, television stations Samanyolu (Milky Way) and Mehtap (Full Moon), and the English-language Ebru satellite television station in the United States. The movement's holdings include a news agency (Cihan Haber Ajansı); the English-language daily Today's Zaman; a weekly newsmagazine, Aksiyon; an Islamic finance institution, Bank Asya (formerly known as Asya Finans); and an insurance company, İşık Sigorta. “Asya” is Turkish for Asia and resonates with the Gülen movement’s extensive presence in Asian countries.

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı (GYV), associated with the Gülen movement, sponsors several dialogue platforms, including the Abant Platform (named after the location in western Turkey where the conferences take place), which brings together intellectuals and scholars to discuss national and international problems; the Eurasian Dialogue Platform, which includes representatives from Turkey and 12 countries in the former Soviet Union and Asia; and the Intercultural Dialogue Platform, which has organized Abrahamic meetings in Turkey, the Russian Federation, Georgia, Germany, and Sweden.

The GYV also runs a large publishing enterprise that publishes books by Gülen and other Turkish authors on historical and sociological subjects, as well as a quarterly magazine, Da, printed in Russian

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18 Yavuz and Esposito, op. cit., p. 19.

19 The movement sponsored the performance of the traditional Mevlevi Sufi ritual by the Whirling Dervishes at the Washington Hebrew Congregation in June 2006, a remarkable presentation of an Islamic ritual in a Jewish religious setting.

20 The Abant Platform has held international conferences in Washington, D.C., in collaboration with The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS); in Brussels, with the Catholic University of Louvain; in Paris, with UNESCO and the Sorbonne; and in Cairo, with the Al-Ahram Strategic Center.
and Turkish in Istanbul, Moscow, and Almaty. According to GYV officials, the movement’s emphasis on Eurasia is explained by Turkey’s historical and cultural links to Turkic-speaking peoples in the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics, where the Gülen movement has also established a large number of schools. It also reflects the interests of businessmen associated with the movement.

The Gülen movement has also developed a very effective international network beyond Eurasia, with many adherents in the United States (where the movement’s founder lives). The Washington-based Rumi Forum organizes several intercultural trips to Turkey each year for U.S. residents to familiarize them with Turkish culture and the social work of the Gülen movement in Turkey. Secular Turks in mainstream Turkish-American organizations and in the Turkish Foreign Service often note that the secular Turkish diaspora is disorganized, fragmented, and inactive by comparison.

In addition to income from publishing, media, and financial enterprises associated with the Gülen movement, funding for the movement comes from donations by supporters, including wealthy Turkish businessmen. For example, one Gülen donor owns Ülker, Turkey’s largest enterprise in many food sectors. The newspaper Zaman is owned by Ali Akbulut, a prominent textile manufacturer. According to GYV officials, their publishing enterprise also generates funding that is used to support the dialogue fora sponsored by the movement.

The movement is viewed with considerable suspicion by secularists, who believe that it has an Islamist agenda. (In some ways, secularist views toward it parallel those toward the AKP.) According to some Turkish analysts, an important part of the AKP base is composed of Gülen supporters. In the 1980s, Gülen adherents supported Turgut Özal, but the movement never supported Erbakan. After the February

21 Interview with Cemal Uşak, Vice President, GYV, Istanbul, June 2005.
22 More than 200 businessmen in Kazakhstan alone, according to Uşak.
25 Interview with a well-informed Turkish journalist, Ankara, June 2007.
28, 1997, “soft coup” that removed Erbakan from office, the movement, through its media—Zaman and STV—supported the reformist movement that led to the establishment of the AKP. Gülen himself moved to the United States in 1999 after he was indicted for allegedly plotting to subvert Turkey’s secular state. He was acquitted in 2006 but has remained in the United States because his return to Turkey could become a political issue.

Gülen’s critics point to videotapes of his speeches that have surfaced as evidence of an intention to overthrow Turkey’s secular order. In these videotapes, Gülen appears to counsel working slowly and diligently until the time comes to change the system. His supporters say that his intention was to advise his followers not to open themselves to discrimination by an open display of religious conviction. Scholars such as İhsan Dağı believe that the movement does not have an Islamist agenda. Gülen’s supporters are attracted, he says, to the Ottoman model of pluralism and tolerance and want to spread their influence. In this regard, he says, the movement has a convergence of interests with the AKP that involves replacing the Kemalist model of uncompromising secularism with a new synthesis that would make more room for religion, but not seeking to establish an Islamic state (a goal that the movement explicitly rejects).

**Islamic Foundations**

Since Ottoman times, Turkey has had a tradition of Islamic foundations (vakıflar), and these remain a part of the Turkish scene in both

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26 Ibid.

27 A Turkish source sympathetic to the Gülen movement told the authors that if Gülen were to return, secularists would liken it to the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini from France in 1979. To prevent problems for the government, the source told us, Gülen has decided to postpone his return. His health may also be a factor in his decision not to return at this time (authors’ discussion in Istanbul, June 2007).

28 The speeches (in Turkish) appear to have been made in the mid-1990s. The tapes are available on the Internet at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ni3Z3qZ7Z4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ni3Z3qZ7Z4); [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tbnGnzdmgU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tbnGnzdmgU); [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRAyGkE1q50](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRAyGkE1q50) (as of March 21, 2008).

urban and provincial settings. They have been important in a society where the social-welfare capacity of the state has been limited and often ineffective in bringing social services to new urban migrants. The Islamist political parties, from Refah to Saadet, and above all, the AKP, have been especially active in this area. In a very real sense, these charitable and social-welfare activities have been the basis for the party’s success at the municipal and national levels. As the AKP has become more entrenched in politics and society, it has also become more capable of raising charitable funds from like-minded (and some not so like-minded) contributors.

Islamic Schools

The proliferation of religious schools (İmam-Hatip) got under way in earnest during the Özal period. The İmam-Hatip schools were established in the 1950s as vocational schools to produce qualified religious personnel. Their curriculum combines training in secular subjects with courses in religion. The schools generated a great deal of controversy, which appeared to be settled by the end of the Refah government and the introduction of regulations limiting their role. In fact, however, the issue of the İmam-Hatip schools remains highly controversial. The AKP government has been placing İmam-Hatip graduates in government departments and state-owned firms at all levels of responsibility. This practice, along with the government’s spring 2004 decision to introduce legislation aimed at giving the schools’ graduates wider access to university and professional opportunities, spurred sharp opposition in secular circles. As Turks on both sides of the controversy are aware, the progressive introduction of AKP cadres, including İmam-Hatip graduates, into the state apparatus may be one of the leading vehicles for change in the secular-religious balance over time.

Shi’ites and Alevi

Turkey’s religious tradition, while overwhelmingly orthodox and Sunni, has always had a strong non-Sunni Muslim minority with
The population of eastern Anatolia was predominantly Shi’ite until the 16th century, when the Ottoman Empire, engaged in a struggle for regional preeminence with Safavid Persia, sought to distinguish itself from its Shi’ite rival by championing Sunni orthodoxy.

The Alevis, Turkey’s leading religious minority, are a significant factor in Turkey’s social and political climate. There is considerable uncertainty about the numbers of Alevis in Turkey. According to some estimates, 70 percent of the non-Sunni Muslim minority of roughly 15 million are Alevis. (The other 30 percent are Shi’ites.) Other estimates are lower, in the range of 5 to 10 million. Most Alevis in Turkey are ethnic Turks, but the sect also includes most of Turkey’s Arabs and perhaps a quarter of its Kurds. Alevis are sometimes confused with Shi’ites because they share some Shi’ite beliefs and practices, such as veneration of the Imam Ali and observance of the holy month of Muharrem, but in fact, they constitute a distinct religion and culture (see discussion below).

Alevis is a highly syncretic belief system with pre-Islamic Shamanistic and Zoroastrian elements, as well as strong Sufi influences (primarily from the Bektaşi school). Alevis differ from orthodox Muslims in that they observe different fasting days, do not attend mosques, do not follow the practice of daily prayers (or pray three times a day), and do not consider the hajj a religious obligation. The Alevis have meeting houses called cem evleri, which are a medium primarily of socialization and not of religious practice. They have unique institutions: the dedelik, zakirlik, and on iki hizmet. Although as far as the Turkish state is concerned, the Alevis are Muslims, some Alevi intellectuals maintain that they are not Muslims at all, and that Alevism

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30 Not to be confused with Syria’s Alawites, who are predominantly Arab and have different beliefs, founding saints, practices, and social structure.

31 The dede is traditionally a religious leader whose authority derives from his charisma as a religious mystic and also from his status as an elder in the community; the zakir is also a religious authority; the on iki hizmet (twelve services) conducts services during mass prayers. Until recently, all of these positions were hereditary. Özlem Göner, “The Transformation of the Alevi Collective Identity,” Cultural Dynamics, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2005, p. 132, fn 14, at http://cdy.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/17/2/107 (as of March 21, 2008).
may in fact be not a religion, but a group identity. The confusion about Alevism derives from the fact that it has not been systematized as a formalistic religion. The Alevis have no systematic theology, no sacred books, and no shari‘a tradition. For them, the important thing is the tasavvuf, or internal experience. In this regard, their approach to religion is very much like that of the Sufis.

The Alevi supported the establishment of the secular republic, which severed the ties to Sunni Islam as a state religion and ended formal discrimination against Alevis, although the Kemalist policy of closing down the places of worship of religious sects adversely affected their religious practices. This is why some Alevis perceive Atatürk as the most important political figure in Alevi history. On the other hand, Göner argues that despite its secular nature, the republic maintained the privileged position of Sunni Islam as a defining characteristic of the Turkish identity and perpetuated the Alevi’s status as outsiders. After the 1960 coup, the Alevis became politically identified with left-wing parties. Marxism gained ground among younger Alevis, who began to redefine Alevism as a socialist movement and became the target of right-wing extremists. In the 1978 Kahramanmarasha incident, right-wing “Grey Wolves” killed about 100 left-wing Alevi activists.

After the 1980 coup, what the prominent Turkish scholar of Alevism Reha Çamuroğlu calls “the Alevi renaissance” began. Alevis gradually abandoned socialist ideology and returned to the religious and

32 The European Union categorizes Alevi as a “non-Sunni Muslim minority.”

33 However, Alevi foundations have made efforts to do just that. Özlem Göner saw the following announcement on the message board of the Karacaahmet Foundation: “Bring us all of those legends, stories and books that are the heritage of your grandfathers and your village, so that we will document them to codify our culture and religion.” Göner, op. cit., p. 129.

34 Irfan in Arabic or Persian.


36 Interview with Reha Çamuroğlu, Istanbul, June 2007. In 1993, Sunni extremists set fire to a hotel in Sivas where Alevi and pro-Alevi intellectuals had gathered. The police were criticized for inaction during this incident, in which 35 people were killed. See Stephen Kinzer, Crescent and Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 64.
communitarian core of Alevism.³⁷ By and large, Alevi intellectuals and community leaders are secular in their behavior. The majority of them support the CHP, although they have an uncomfortable relationship with Turkey’s secular establishment and the nationalist right, many of whose members tend to associate Alevis with leftist politics.³⁸ In the July 2007 parliamentary election, the Alevi Cem Foundation leader, Professor İzzettin Doğan, called on Alevi voters to support the CHP or other secular parties because, he said, the AKP intended to overthrow the country’s secular order.³⁹

There are a number of Alevi foundations that seek to promote Alevi cultural awareness and end official discrimination against Alevism—for example, by having the Alevi meeting houses designated as official houses of prayer.⁴⁰ The most important of these foundations is the Cem Foundation, mentioned above. The Ehl-i Beyt Foundation represents a strand of Alevism that is closer to Shi’a Islam—its adherents pray five times a day and go on the hajj.⁴¹

### Turkish Attitudes Toward Religion

It has been assumed that most Turks identify themselves as Turks or citizens of the Turkish Republic first, and as Muslims second. However, a recent survey funded by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation suggests otherwise.

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³⁸ In the 2007 parliamentary election, in a remarkable break with past patterns, Çamuroğlu was elected to parliament on the AKP ticket. He told us before the election that it was difficult for Erdoğan to invite him to join the ticket (because of prejudice against Alevi within the AKP base) and difficult for him to accept (because of Alevi prejudices against the AKP and Sunnis), but that he accepted because the AKP is trying to change from a moderate Islamist to a liberal party. Interview with Reha Çamuroğlu, Istanbul, June 2007.


⁴⁰ “Alevis await decision on house of worship status for cem evleri,” Today’s Zaman, June 22, 2007, at http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=114687 (as of March 21, 2008). The official view is that since Alevi (in the state’s view) are Muslims, they should pray in mosques.

⁴¹ Interview with Hüseyin Özcan, Fatih University, Istanbul, June 2007.
ties Foundation (TESEV), in which 1,500 interviews were conducted in 23 provinces, pointed to a striking increase in the sense of Muslim identity as a component of Turkishness (see Table 2.1).

Interpreting the poll, TESEV Board of Directors Chairman Can Paker posited that Turks divide into two sociopolitical parts: one-third of them are secular, and two-thirds are religious. Of secular Turks, about 10 percent are ultrasecularists, very nationalistic, anti-Europe, and increasingly anti–United States. The other 20 percent are democratic and deeply concerned that Turkish secularism could be lost—that there could be a gradual erosion of secular rights and that over time Turkey could be “Iranized.” Of the religious Turks, some 10 percent are in favor of a state based on shari’ā (Islamic law); 50 to 60 percent are conservative, but they also want to be modern, and they have middle-class aspirations. The religious divide does not align clearly with geographic lines. People in eastern Anatolia, for example, are more socially conservative, but not necessarily more religious than those in western Turkey. Support for shari’ā law is not greater in eastern Anatolia than in the suburbs of some of Turkey’s largest cities.42

Table 2.1
Turks’ Primary Identity

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<th>Primary Identity</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turk</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen of Turkish Republic</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurd</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alevi</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reply</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The survey confirms the widespread impression that Turks are becoming more religious, but it also shows that the vast majority of Turks oppose a state based on religion: 76 percent of the respondents opposed the implementation of *shari‘a*, while only 9 percent favored it. In 1995, 27 percent favored it. Among AKP voters, 70 percent opposed *shari‘a* and 14 percent favored it. This was a higher proportion than among the population at large, but still a small minority.\(^\text{43}\) A large majority (81.9 percent, but only 60 percent of AKP voters) said they believed that people are able to exercise Islamic practices freely. That is to say, four-fifths of the respondents were satisfied that the secular state did not interfere with the practice of religion. Those who took the opposite view (40 percent of the AKP voters) gave the headscarf issue as the predominant example of the oppression of religious people by the state.\(^\text{44}\)

An interesting finding of the TESEV survey concerns the qualifications that people would like their president to have. In the respondents’ view, these qualifications should include:\(^\text{45}\)

- Having an exemplary lifestyle for modern Turkey (86 percent of respondents)
- Being a devout Muslim (74 percent)
- Being a guardian of secularity (75 percent).

\(^\text{43}\) Ibid. The 2006 TESEV study (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2006) also references other studies that asked a similar question and found that *shari‘a* was supported by 29 percent in 1995, 27 percent in 1996, 20 percent in 1998, and 16 percent in 2002. While these other surveys are not exactly comparable to TESEV’s, they seem to confirm that support for *shari‘a* has been waning steadily since the mid-1990s. However, the TESEV report also presents intriguing results on another survey item. Asked whether there should be religion-based political parties, 25 percent said “Yes” in 1999, and 41 percent said “Yes” in 2006. “No” responses declined from 61 percent in 1999 to 54 percent in 2006. “Don’t know/no response” fell from 15 percent in 1999 to 5 percent in 2006. This suggests that the AKP has won additional sympathizers to its stance.

\(^\text{44}\) Interview with Can Paker, Istanbul, June 2007.

\(^\text{45}\) Other qualifications cited were the ability to capture public opinion (89 percent); knowledge of and experience in foreign affairs (87 percent); education in the law (83 percent); and wife’s head being not covered (50 percent). The broader message in the survey is that Turks care more about statesmanlike qualities than about controversial Islam/secularity issues when it comes to selecting their president. Çarkoğlu and Toprak, op. cit., 2006.
Clearly, Turks do not see a contradiction between being a good Muslim and being secular. This is consistent with Turks’ conception of who is a Muslim, which involves high tolerance. Of the survey respondents, 66 percent agreed that those who drank alcohol were Muslims (although 71 percent agreed that alcohol should be banned during Ramadan); 85 percent considered an uncovered woman a Muslim; 29 percent said they would be disturbed if miniskirted women were in the majority in the neighborhood, while 66 percent were undecided; 13 percent said they would be disturbed if covered women were in the majority in the neighborhood, with a large majority (84 percent) undecided; 89 percent thought that there can be “good” people among believers of other religions, but only 42 percent believed that non-Muslims could go to heaven (provided they have not sinned). On the other hand, minority rights of Kurds, Alevi, and non-Muslims found very little support. The TESEV survey also confirms that the vast majority of Turks oppose terrorism. A large majority (65.5 percent) oppose suicide attacks even against “occupation” (20.2 percent support them); and 82 percent oppose Palestinian suicide attacks against civilians (8.3 percent support them). Further, 56 percent agree that the 9/11 attacks cannot be justified from an Islamic point of view (22 percent disagree).

The TESEV survey has touched off a lively debate in Turkey and among Turkey-watchers about what the results actually indicate. That Turks are more open in discussing their Muslim identity takes few observers by surprise, but the survey leaves much open to interpretation, including the distinction between religiosity and attitudes toward religion in politics. The debate is often couched in terms of the “secular-Islamist divide.” But many Turks argue that the real divide in Turkish politics today is not between secularists and Islamists, but rather between nationalists (or statists) and reformers. Ali Çarkoğu, one of the co-authors of the 2006 TESEV study, believes that the bottom line of the report is that there is potential in Turkey to pursue religious issues from a liberal perspective.

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46 The tolerance data are from the 2000 TESEV study (Ali Çarkoğu and Binnaz Toprak, Türkiye’de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset, Istanbul: TESEV, 2000).

47 Çarkoğu and Toprak, 2006.

48 Ali Çarkoğu, presentation, op. cit.
The Violent Fringe

For historical and cultural reasons, Turkey has been more resistant to radical and violent varieties of Islamism than other Muslim societies have. Nevertheless, Turkey has not been immune to the infiltration of radical Salafi ideologies. Interestingly, radical Islamism entered the Turkish politico-religious stream by way of Europe. In the 1980s, Cemalettin Kaplan, the former mufti of Adana and deputy head of the Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, for several years, was granted political asylum in Germany, where he founded the İslami Cemaatler ve Cemiyetler Birliği (Union of Islamic Communities and Societies), with the aim of establishing a theocratic state in Turkey. In 1993, Kaplan’s organization became the Anadolu Federe İslam Devleti (Federated Islamic State of Anatolia). Upon Cemalettin Kaplan’s death in 1995, his son Metin became the self-styled “caliph” of the extremist organization, which he ran until he was extradited to Turkey in 2004.49

Currently, the major sources of radical Islamist violence in Turkey are Turkish Hezballah and al-Qaeda. Although Turkish Hezballah has declined since the death of its leader Hüseyin Velioğlu in a shootout with police in January 2000, al-Qaeda–linked cells retain the potential to carry out terrorist attacks. Neither group, however, is connected to any significant sector of Turkish Muslim society.

Turkish Hezballah (not to be confused with Lebanese Hezballah) was established in southeastern Anatolia in the 1980s. Although largely a Kurdish Sunni group, it was influenced by the Iranian revolution and for a time received logistical and financial support from Iran. Turkish Hezballah’s goal was the establishment of an Islamic state through a strategy of stages, the last of which was armed struggle (jihad) to remove the forces of unbelief. Its main target, however, was not the state, but the PKK, which gained the organization some degree of tolerance from the authorities. In the 1990s, it began to expand into western Turkey, where it carried out a number of assassinations. The organization went

into decline after the security forces killed Velioğlu and captured other senior leaders. Turkish Hezbollah has not conducted a major operation since the assassination of the Diyarbakır police chief, Gaffar Okkan, and five other officers in 2001.\textsuperscript{50}

A Turkish al-Qaeda cell carried out two sets of attacks in Istanbul in November 2003: the bombings of the Beth Israel and Neve Shalom synagogues and, five days later, of the British consulate general and the HSBC Bank headquarters. According to Turkish prosecutors, the bombings were orchestrated by a senior al-Qaeda operative, Syrian Louai Sakka (aka Louai al-Turki), with specific approval from Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Sakka was arrested in August 2005 after a bomb he had been assembling blew up in an apartment in Antalya.\textsuperscript{51}

Since then, there have been further arrests of al-Qaeda suspects. Eleven were arrested in Istanbul in May 2007, and 23 were arrested in Bursa in June 2007. In September 2007, the Turkish police foiled a massive bombing attack in Ankara. A van in a multistory parking lot in the Kurtulus neighborhood of the city was found to contain a 580-kilogram improvised explosive device (IED) consisting of ammonium nitrate, sodium nitrate, TNT, and 20 small LPG bottles, to which three cell phones were connected, suggesting that the perpetrators planned to detonate the device remotely. Although the authorities have directed their investigation at the PKK, the device most closely resembles those used in the November 2003 Istanbul bombings.\textsuperscript{52}

**Turks in Europe**

The large-scale migration of Turks to Western Europe, especially Germany, and the establishment of large Turkish communities in Europe


\textsuperscript{52} The PKK has no record of using large, vehicle-borne IEDs, nor does it have a tradition of mass-casualty terrorist attacks. See “Turkish Police No Nearer to Solving Attempted Ankara Bombing,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 172, September 18, 2007.
with intimate ties to the homeland but outside of the purview of Turkish authorities have affected Turkey as a whole in profound ways.

According to German census data, in 2000, there were 1,998,534 non-citizen Turks in Germany, comprising 2.5 percent of the total population. The Turkish population in Germany is relatively conservative, traditional, and religious. Kurds also make up a relatively large part—perhaps one-third—of this community. It is a significant feature of Turkish political Islam that many of the more extreme movements are in Europe rather than in Turkey itself.

The explanation for this resides in part with the more religious and conservative nature of Turkish migrants to Europe. It also reflects the relative ease with which extremist groups—both Islamic and Kurdish—have been able to organize and operate outside the reach of Turkish courts and security agencies. Only in the post-9/11 climate of increased scrutiny and more frequent prosecutions has this situation begun to change, with radical groups outside Turkey coming under increasing pressure from terrorism-conscious European governments.

The main Turkish radical groups active in Germany are Milli Görüş (National View) and Kalifatstaat, also known as the Kaplan Group. Milli Görüş is the European offshoot of Necmettin Erbakan’s series of political parties, as well as a concept in Turkish Islamist domestic politics. It has always been a key theme of Erbakan’s rhetoric, and it dates back to the pre-Refah period, when he led his original National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi (MNP)). Although never defined clearly, the party’s motto was used to emphasize the difference between Erbakan’s line and that of other parties that were, in his words, “imitators of the West.” Today’s Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi (SP)), which continues the MNP legacy and is run by Erbakan protégé Recai Kutan, still uses Milli Görüş rhetoric. The phrase is also embraced by political Islamists in Europe as a way to imply adherence to the Erbakan way. In Germany, Milli Görüş has a membership of 26,500, but according to German authorities, the group reaches a far larger audience throughout Europe through the 514 mosque communities it operates (including 323 in Germany); its newspaper, Milli

Gazete (actually the European edition of the Turkish paper of the same name); and its extensive Islamic education programs.  

The more radical Kalifatsstaat (Kaplan Group), led by the self-declared Emirs der Glaubigen und Kalifen der Muslime, Metin Kaplan, has as its goal destroying the secular state in Turkey and replacing it with an Islamic state based on shari’a law. Kaplan’s followers were involved in a plot to crash an airplane into the Atatürk Mausoleum in Ankara on the 75th anniversary of the Turkish Republic. The Kalifatsstaat and its associated organizations were declared illegal by German authorities in 2004, and Kaplan was arrested and convicted of soliciting the assassination of a rival preacher, Ibrahim Sofu, in 1996. After serving a four-year sentence, Kaplan was extradited to Turkey in 2004, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment.  

Until recently, Turks in Europe have by and large not been involved in terrorism. However, in September 2007, German authorities broke up a terrorist ring that was plotting attacks against U.S. military installations in Germany and Frankfurt Airport. One of the individuals arrested was a 28-year-old Turk, Adem Yilmaz, who had trained in an al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan in March 2006. The Turkish dimension of the plot has shaken Germans, who have long taken comfort in the belief that their Muslim community—which is mostly composed of Turks—was less prone to terrorism or radical Islamic ideas than Islamic communities elsewhere in Europe were. Yilmaz came from a largely middle-class background and had spent most of his life in Germany. Like many of the younger Turks born in Germany, he rejected the established mosque sponsored by the Turkish government in favor of a more radical independent mosque.

55 Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005.
57 This statement refers to ethnic Turks, not to Turkish Kurds associated with the PKK.
Quite apart from the issue of Islamic radicalism among Turks abroad, there is the larger question of why many second- and even third-generation Turks in Germany and elsewhere have been attracted to Islamist movements. For some analysts, the answer is not simply the more traditional social outlook brought from provincial Turkey. Younger émigré Turks may be turning to Islam as a reaction to perceived discrimination by and alienation from the host society.\(^{59}\) Many supporters of *Milli Görüs*, as well as adherents of the Kaplan Group, have been drawn from this sector.\(^{60}\) Given the size of the Turkish community in Germany, it is not surprising that most of the leading tendencies in contemporary Turkish political Islam are represented by sister organizations in Germany. This has also been true of various Kurdish movements, both violent and nonviolent, whose financing has relied heavily on émigré sources.

Kurdish groups are also active in Europe. The PKK reportedly gets the bulk of its financing from the drug trade. British security officials estimate that the PKK smuggles 40 percent of the heroin going from the East into the EU annually, calculated to be worth $5 billion by the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime. The PKK’s fundraising activities also include the trafficking of illegal immigrants.\(^{61}\)

\(^{59}\) See Werner Schiffauer, “Islamism in the Diaspora: The Fascination of Political Islam Among Second Generation German Turks,” unpublished paper, Frankfurt/Oder: Europa-Universität Viadrina, 1999. Until recently, Germany did not bestow citizenship on non-ethnic German residents upon birth. In 1999, the German government passed a law that became effective in 2000, bestowing citizenship on persons born in Germany whose parents had been residents for the previous eight years or had had permanent legal-resident status for at least three years. However, these people must make a choice between German and Turkish citizenship when they reach the age of 23. Deutsche Botschaft Ankara, at http://www.ankara.diplo.de/Vertretung/ankara/tr/01/stag.html (as of March 21, 2008).

\(^{60}\) See Schiffauer, op. cit., pp. 5–6.