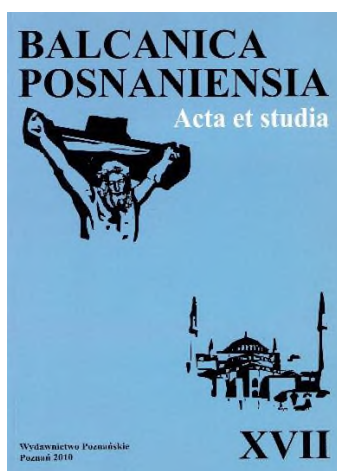




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EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC DISCOURSE IN TURKEY

MICHEL BOZDÉMIR

ABSTRACT. Michel Bozdémir, *Evolution of Islamic discourse in Turkey*

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The religious fact in contemporary European societies represents a sociological phenomenon, more than the political one, nevertheless some political parties maintain the epithet 'Christian' in their name. Although Turkey has established a radically secularised state at the beginning of the last century, the religion has gained a major political influence in the recent decades. Since 2002, one single party coming from these Islamic roots governs the country alone, even if it does not and cannot legally call itself 'Islamic'.

Comments on such an important change constitute the subject matter of my paper which tries to put out the fluctuation of Islamic discourse in its recent return to the political arena.

What are the public and dismissed intentions of political Islam? To take the power like any other political party? To transform the secular regime into an Islamic republic?

The subject needs a large scale of research. Here I suggest some preliminary considerations. In order to analyse the contemporary Turkish Islamic discourse, I believe that we can observe roughly three stages characterizing the Islamic discourse trend; the Ottoman, the republican and the democratic stages.

Reminiscences of the Ottoman times

In the ancient regime, Islam was obviously honoured at the highest level, even if a double jurisdiction was to be observed; *shariat* and *örfiyye* (religious and ordinary laws) together. The Ottoman society was multiconfessional but the State was officially Islamic.

At the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic discourse was essentially a rejection of the European aggression and its civilization. We can label it as a discourse of refusal. According to this refusal discourse, all is to be found in the holy Koran; the inventions, discoveries, miracles and mysteries... The rhetoric is well-known: the unbelievers of Europe took over everything from the Koran; mathematics, astronomy, biology... and even numbers which they adopted from the Muslims.¹

The emblematic words of 'national' poet Mehmet Akif Ersoy, author of the national anthem, contain a quite characteristic tone of bitterness and resentment at the end of the empire and the great war:

Medeniyet dediğin tek dişi kalmış canavar ' (What you call civilisation [European] is nothing else but a monster with a single tooth).

There are also some popular clichés which express the rejection/repulsion to all ideas or items coming from the West such as:

'gavur icadı ' (invention of devil/invention of the unbeliever),

'şeytan işi ' (*devil's work*) for engines of European origin like bicycle, speakers, etc.

We remember also the reticence, if not rejection, of some imams to use speakers to give the call to prayer in the 1950s.

Inaudible discourse: 1922-1950

After the Republic, the Islamic discourse took a long and rough road from the 1920s to the 1950s. Of course, it was completely inexistent at the political level; Islam was entirely and strictly limited to personal and family spheres up to the arrival of democracy in the 1950s. During that period no religious instruction was provided. Visible signs of Islam were eclipsed or replaced by neutral or secular patterns.

On another register, we can notice the same process of desacralisation of language.² Public speeches in the Islamic tradition must begin with the evocation of Allah: *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* (In the name of Allah, clement and forgiveness) as they have to be finished with a final formula *Sadakallahülazim* (The truth belongs to the Almighty). In the Kemalist republic, all kinds of religious presence were eliminated from the public life. A whole positivist approach was applied to the State life eliminating all kind of religious legitimacy. On the same register, the translation of the Koran into Turkish is an attempt to nationalise Islam and to deconstruct the traditional practice of religion. In the field of Islamic instruction, believers were particularly affected; even the traditional Coranic courses (*Kuran kursları*), kind of catechism, were hardly tolerated.

¹ This argument *All is in Koran* can be met on a very large scale from the popular literature to political speeches. For example, it is recurrent in Erbakan's addresses: « Europeans are indebted to Islamic civilisation in the knowledge of mathematics, numbers, clocks... ». Cf. our article *Les relations turco-islamiques*, in: "Les Annales de l'Autre Islam", n°4, Paris, 1997, pp. 13-34.

² Cf. our article on the subject *Manière de désacraliser une langue, le cas du turc*, in: *Süzipât-i mü'ellege, Contaminazioni e spigolature turcologiche*, Terra Ferma, Treviso, pp. 75-82.

But the most provocative attempt to secularise and at the same time nationalise the discursive practice of Islam concerns the translation of the call to prayer from Arabic into Turkish, *ezan*. So, from 1932 to 1950, *ezan* will be sung in Turkish version in all minarets of Turkey.³

Renaissance of the Islamic discourse: 1950-1997

Thanks to the democracy since 1950, all right-wing parties have tolerated or favoured the Islamic feelings of the population. The call to prayer in Arabic is authorised immediately after the Democrats' coming to power. The religious discourse begins to find greater possibilities in the public life. In the mean time, all the parties in power followed liberal and Western oriented policies.

Finally, at the end of 1960s, a real Islamic political family appeared under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. The Party of National Order (Millî Nizam), National Salvation (Millî Selamet), Prosperity (Refah), Virtue (Fazilet), and finally the Party of Happiness (Saadet) marked the irresistible climbing of political Islam. It is worth mentioning that the parties created by Erbakan were called 'National' twice and the name of its official ideology: still called National Vision (Millî Görüş).

Here it can be discussed why this insistence for "National," especially when we remember the modest consideration that the notion of Nation or ethnicity (*kawmiyya*) has benefited in the Islamic exegete in comparison of the notion of universal Islamic community (*Umma*). Was it a tactical title to avoid the critics from the establishment? Was it an attempt to promote a kind of Turko-Islamic syntheses?

Since the institutionalisation of democracy, the Islamic discourse adopted a 'come-back' strategy which can be identified as "*takiyye*." It is a fluctuating discourse which permits the speakers to hide their real targets and take a conciliating tone with the establishment. That means that the religious personnel followed a very progressive expression switching from hard and fast pretensions to a moderate Islamic profile. There were no excessive demands like Caliphate or Shariat from the representative figures of the Islamic movement, but a sustained demand in the need of religious formation of the youth was always pronounced although in reasonable terms like "to guide the uneducated people, to provide the enlightened Islamic instructors (*aydın din adamı*) instead of unqualified obscure figures." That is how the Imam Hatip schools were put on a long ascendant route from 1951 up to 1997.⁴

³ Ibidem, *Manière de désacraliser une langue, le cas du turc*, p. 76.

⁴ Uriel Heyd had foreseen very early the developments of these schools and the attitude of generations formed by them towards the modernisation of Turkey, *Revival of Islam in Turkey*, Jerusalem, 1968.

Towards a modern and efficient Islamic discourse

After the post-modern Coup d'État of 1997, as if the long Erbakan decades (1970-2000) were a kind of preparation time, a new generation of politicians started working on the renewal of the Islamic discourse. They officially refused the term *Islam* to qualify their party. They identified themselves as conservatives and democrats. They succeeded in gaining popular support at the first elections. Now they are in power for eight years.

Departed from a simply anti-occidental wail at the end of the First World War, the Islamic discourse has progressively invaded almost the entire range of public life; preserving its archaic accent at the popular level and becoming modern and a lot more subtle at the intellectual level. And finally, at the political level, after a real sustained pro-western European commitment up to the end of 2008, it seems to switch nowadays to a mixture of a real politics coloured with some old Islamic rhetoric.

We have to mention here a time of transition from the Coup d'État of 1980 to the end of the century where we observe a sort of syntheses operated during the Özal years. What was called at that time *Türk-islam sentezi* (Turkish-Islamic syntheses) can be considered a time of maturation/preparation for a full emancipation of the Islamic discourse.⁵

Now, I will try to provide some key points as a response to my initial questions:

What are the main characteristics of the Islamic demands in terms of politics?

Actually, we can notice two series of Islamic aspirations at the internal level expressed as open demands:

1. the right of veiled women to live and work in public life as they are dressed: at the University but also (although there is much less emphasis on this point) at school, at the office, at the hospital, in the administration... everywhere they like,
2. the right to religious education at the secondary level with the possibility for those who succeeded to go to the University.

These demands seem frozen for the time being after the cancelations of the Constitutional Court of 2008 about the liberalisation of young women's headscarf. However, since the constitutional referendum of September 12, 2010 the question may come again to the public discussion.

The fear of Islamic layman concerns essentially the position of the women in the society. At a general level, it is of common observation that a secondary position is reserved to women in an Islamic society emphasizing a separate male-female way of life. The presence of young girls at school raises problems, especially where they have to attend certain courses as physical education, music, theatre... with boys. This also creates difficulties in the mosques of course, and also in swimming pools, concerts, cinemas and public meetings, etc. where girls and boys are together.

⁵ For an analysis of this ideology cf. Füsun Üstel, *Synthèse turco-islamique entre traditionalisme et modernité*, in: Jacques Thobie, Salgur Kançal, *Industrialisation, Communication et Rapports sociaux en Turquie et Méditerranée orientale*, L'Harmattan, Varia Turcica, 1994, pp. 387-400.

How is the vocabulary chosen in order to make the population feel the real intentions of Islamic politicians? By what kind of tricky ways, "winks," *jeux de mots*, allusions or omissions do the politicians of Islamic tendency transmit their message to the receptive strata of society?

Can we detect a kind of discourse strategy on behalf of Islamic movements, and if so, what are the ways and means and also limits of this strategy?

Here are some transmission channels:

- invocation of Allah, not in Arabic at the beginning, but in Turkish mostly at the end of speeches,
- allusive definition of God; "our creator, we adore human beings because of their creator....,"
- celebrating the month of Ramadan,
- organizing the collective meals of rupture of religious fasting (*iftar*),
- attending mosques publicly, especially for Friday prayer.

All these public manifestations of Islamic posture come to suggest definitely a religious sensibility convertible in terms of electoral polls.

The choice of the vocabulary equally constitutes a way of transmission:

- In general, the old Ottoman vocabulary (stuffed with words borrowed from Arabic and Persian) is preferred over the modern Turkish:
- *İstiklâl harbi* (Liberation war) instead of *Kurtuluş Savaşı*.
- *muasır medeniyet* (contemporary civilization) instead of *çağdaş uygarlık*.
- Particularly, we observe an abundance of Islamic terms. *Allah* from Arabic is of course preferred to *Tanrı* from the ancient Turkish. At the end of the speeches, *Allah* is evoked in some way or another (with the help of God, if God permits us, thanks to God, God bless you, etc.).⁶

In the past ten years, terms like democracy, tolerance and respect of Human Rights have been frequently evoked to require and justify different Islamic demands. For example, the practice of double jurisdiction (*çok hukukluluk*) "common law and the Islamic law *shariat*."

Here, the political actors are playing with the words. The foundation of Atatürk is questioned: "The target is to reach the level of the civilisation," which obviously implies a civilisation in singular, the European one. They put it on plural which decreases and relativizes the target and suggests the plurality of the civilisations, that includes of course, the Islamic one.

On the political level, there is no longer any reference to religious concepts; because it is legally impossible to call to a return to Caliphate or shariat. Instead, modern terms are largely used as Humans Rights, equity, freedom of conviction and individual liberties, especially the right for women to choose how to dress themselves.

But what we observe at the international level and that is new is the openly declared Islamic inspiration of diplomatic speeches: we have more and more examples at the highest level, I only mention two recent declarations: Prime Minister Recep

⁶ Ibidem, *Manière de désacraliser une langue, le cas du turc*, p. 77.

Tayyip Erdogan declared: "The Muslims do not commit genocide" and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, before the Ambassadors of Arab countries: "We will pray in Jerusalem once the Palestinian State is created!"

Another aspect of the Islamic discourse is its anti-Semitic character. This is due to the opposition of the Islamic world to the creation of the State of Israel. Here also, we can observe a clear evolution: we shifted from the "the cut of diplomatic relations" required publicly during the election campaign in 1991 by Erbakan to "a military alliance with Israel" by the same politician a few years later, being Prime Minister!

Since 2002, although anti-Semitism has been completely abandoned in the political discourse, it is always present in some popular literature and journalism for which "The sons of Abraham will never have a State!"

I think we can now observe a keen intention of the Islamic block to play a role at every level of public life, in the society as well as in internal and international politics. The means chosen are definitely pacific. It is true that the way their movement has come to power cannot be considered simply as the way of a sincere democracy believer. Talking about this, Erbakan's declaration included once the formula "bloody or bloodless" describing the way to come to power. Before coming to power, the Prime Minister Erdogan compared democracy to a train which could be taken when necessary and left whenever they liked. But in the last stage, especially after 2002, they were conscious that their existence cannot be conceived outside democracy. So, a very careful approach in speech building is observed on their behalf.

After more than a half-century in a progressive democracy which permitted Islam to have a more and more liberal expression, are there again any *hard and fast rules* to respect today? Briefly speaking, we can suggest two points of importance which can lead the country to serious unrest. What the State oriented circles call "Red lines": (e.g.) a pure Islamic Republic and/or an ethnically divided Turkey. There are the "Red lines" of the army, of Social Democrats and Nationalist opposition. A large part of the civic society shares also these fears.

That is why the Islamic discourse insists on democratic rule, that is why it shows such importance to the candidacy of Turkey to the European Union.

This is perhaps the Turkish way of conciliation between politics and religion, between Islam and democracy.