

**Back to the Ottomans**

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**Why Turkey matters so much to Islam**

FOR many Westerners, Hidayet Tuksal is a confusing figure. Headscarfed and imposing, she grew up in a strict Muslim household in Ankara. At university in the 1980s, she focused on the Koran's teaching about women. She has since made a name arguing that much of the discrimination against women in the Islamic world has scant basis in the sacred text (because Eve was described as weak and flawed, it does not follow that all women are). For this she has got into trouble with traditionalists.

AP

**The prime minister, his wife and a headscarf**

On the other hand, this 44-year-old mother of three is no fan of Turkey's secularist laws, especially when it comes to that headscarf. Because she wears it, she is currently banned from teaching at university. (Had she been younger, she could not have studied there either: the army tightened up the laws on what students could wear in 1997.) From her perspective, Turkey's secularists are stopping her educating Muslim women about their freedoms.

Turkey is buzzing with such arguments. When the (mildly Islamist) Justice and Development (AK) Party came into power in 2002, people joked that it was like electing the Taliban. So far the experience has been revolutionary in the good sense. Under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AK Party has occasionally veered off target (at one time he wanted to jail adulterers), but the main emphasis has been on freeing markets and stamping out corruption.

In July Mr Erdogan faced down mutterings from the army and deservedly won a second term. But now secular Turkey is getting worried again. Another Islamist, Abdullah Gul, has become president—an especially controversial appointment because his wife wears the headscarf. Restaurants have become

nervous about serving food during the Ramadan fast. Recently a young woman wearing a knee-length tunic and leggings was arrested in Istanbul for “indecent exposure”.

Now Mr Erdogan wants to “modernise” the constitution. The new version would get rid of the headscarf ban at universities. It also keeps some illiberal traits: a clause saying the state should ensure equality between the sexes has gone; an infamous piece of the penal code, which was used to prosecute various writers for “insulting Turkishness”, remains. Many women who supported Mr Erdogan against the army are worried.

## **How different is Islam?**

Turkey matters enormously to two big debates about religion in public life. The first is specifically to do with Islam: how compatible is it with political modernity? The second should be universal: where exactly to draw the line between religion and the modern state? Sadly, Turkey is one of the few Muslim countries where that debate is possible to have.

Merely posing the question of whether Islam is different raises Muslim hackles. They sense a post-September 11th witch-hunt, and with some cause. Every Western schoolboy now “knows” that the Koran promises suicide-bombers will be provided with 72 virgins (not true) and that in Muslim countries you can get stoned to death for being gay (true, sadly, in some places). Yet few Western schoolboys know much about the equally blood-curdling texts of the Old Testament: if you want illiberal family law, Leviticus is hard to beat.

Islamic politics, Muslims continue, is not uniform: Kano is very different from Karachi or Kuwait. And the troubles of Arabia, they maintain, have little to do with religion. They were caused by the Ottoman empire being amateurishly subdivided by the British, invaded by the Americans, occupied by Israel and exploited by the oil companies.

All these things may be true, but they do not stop Islam being different. There are still reasonable questions a dispassionate observer (or a Muslim) should be asking. Why is Islam involved in quite so many modern wars of religion? Why have its believers coped so badly with modernisation? Back in 1700 it controlled three of the world's economic superpowers—the Ottoman empire, Persia and India. Today, despite (or perhaps because of) oil, the Arab world in particular lags behind on most indices of modernity, from the number of books published to investment in science. Political bad luck cannot explain all of this.

The first answer that many Muslims and Westerners jump to—that Islam is stuck in a clash of civilisations with the West—seems unconvincing. Put simply, the main battle is not taking place in that arena. One great irony of the war on terror is that although George Bush has declared war upon jihadism, his enemies devote very little energy to fighting him. The jihadists' main war is not against the West but against apostate Muslim regimes: where they do battle with outsiders, it is mainly against occupying powers—Russia in Chechnya, America in Iraq, India in Kashmir and Israel in Palestine.

## **New depth to an old split**

The two most important arguments about Islam are both internal ones. The first is the doctrinal split between Sunnis and Shias. An ancient disagreement to do with the primacy of various successors of the Prophet has become a greater schism—exaggerated not just by the sectarian killing in Iraq but also by the worries of the Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia, about Shiite Iran. Emmanuel Sivan, an Israeli expert on Islam, points out that in the battle for Gaza, Fatah loyalists accused Hamas of being Shia. The same “insult” is used in Nigeria.

The more complicated argument has to do with how much Islam should adapt to the modern world. Westerners, as you might expect, like to split Muslims between traditionalists and modernisers. In fact, the modernisers (people, say, who would like to let women lead prayers) are a tiny group. The main argument is between two sets of traditionalists, with both claiming to be the authentic ones.

The first strain, pushed especially by Wahhabi preachers and Saudi money, argues that nothing of much value has happened in Islam since the first couple of generations of the faith. Corrupted by infidel ideas, Islam must re-centre itself on the Koran. For Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab (1703-92), the battle was against the worship of tombs and relics; for his spiritual descendants and other fundamentalists it is against television and Western clothes.

The second strain, while respecting the Koran, points to traditions from a later period—and especially to Islam's capacity to react creatively to new circumstances. The Koran, it argues, is the word of God given to nomadic tribes: it needs to be put into context. This version, which would be the heart of any Islamic reformation, is still the dominant strain in the great universities of Cairo and Damascus. But it has lost out to the Wahhabi strain in countless mosques and *madrassas* around the world.

Worse, from a modernising point of view, this second strain counts for virtually nothing in the main political battle within the Islamic world. That battle has little to do with religious reformation. Rather, as this newspaper described it earlier this year (see [article](#)), it comes down to a separate contest between martyrs and traitors.

The martyrs have a simple, coherent message that goes well with the Wahhabi and other Islamist causes: failure in Muslim countries has been due to moral dissoluteness and secularism. Society should be rebased around the Koran. The martyrs' strength is that organisations like Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood are relatively incorrupt and democratic. On the other side of the argument are “the traitors”—the Arab world's deeply undemocratic regimes, most of them propped up by some mixture of Western might and oil money. Some, such as Egypt, suppress the Islamists in the name of maintaining secularism; others, such as Saudi Arabia, suck up to the radicals. All the traitors in their different ways feed the sly line that Islam is incompatible with democracy.

## Neither martyr nor traitor

Is there an alternative to this dismal choice? Some Asian brands of Islam seem better suited to coping with the modern world. The government of Malaysia (which in 2001 controversially decided it had always been an Islamic state) has actively favoured Islam and has increased the role of *sharia* courts, to the yelps of human-rights people; yet it has also presided over a vibrant economy. The tiny emirate of Dubai in the Gulf is another success. But Turkey offers by far the greatest hope.

Historically, the heirs to the Ottoman empire have fallen into the “traitor” category. The West tolerated military interference in Turkish politics, partly because it was told that the alternative—religious extremism—was worse. The AK Party has disproved that caricature. Indeed it marks something new: a party of fervent Islamists, neither traitors nor martyrs. Provided it sticks to its course, it could help normalise the argument about Islam. It would also make it possible for Muslim countries to engage in a more reasonable debate about religion's role in the public square.

Ms Tuksal's problems to do with headscarves and universities might be serious for her; but in many ways they are excitingly normal. France has a similar dispute over whether Muslims can wear headscarves to school. And virtually every rich country is debating the role of religion in education or the acceptability of religious symbols in public life. Britain has had arguments not just about Muslim veils but also about Christian crucifixes, Sikh turbans and Hindu nose studs.

Why has the public square become so fiercely contested? One reason is that both religious people and their secular opponents are getting more uppity: now that they are both choosing their beliefs, they are damned if they are going to let others boss them around. But in truth drawing a strict line between church and state has always proved enormously difficult.

This newspaper, for example, has always leant towards strict separation, but, like most liberals, it has frequently found that goal

Reuters



conflicting with other ones. For instance, if you support giving poor parents vouchers to choose schools, why shouldn't they pick religious schools—especially when in many inner cities they may be the best choice? In northern Nigeria American aid agencies seeking to promote female literacy faced a choice between giving money to secular schools (which Muslims shun) or to hybrid ones, which mix the standard *madrassa* fare with some Western basics (and are popular with Muslims). The aid people rightly chose the latter—even though some congressman is bound to complain about taxpayers' money going to help Islam.



### Ataturk: the way forward or back?

So it is normal to have disagreement about the public square. But Islam stands out as the religion that brooks the least difference between church and state. In the Christian world, with the tiny exception of the Vatican, clerics have no urge to rule anybody. The Church of England seems embarrassed by having 26 bishops in the House of Lords (as it should be). Christian Democrat parties everywhere tend to treat the first part of their name as silent.

The idea of a firm division between God and Caesar is embedded not just in the gospels but also in Christian history: hence the Holy Roman Emperors' multiple disagreements with the pope. Islam has always left less room for the secular. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad was a ruler, warrior and lawmaker. Islam, which means "submission", teaches that the primary unit of society is the *umma*, the brotherhood of believers, and it provides a system of laws—*sharia*—for people to live by. As Mark Lilla, an American academic, has argued, there has been no "great separation": pious Muslims still turn to holy texts for guidance on all aspects of their lives.

In some extreme Islamic countries *sharia*, a system rooted in medieval traditions, is so strictly interpreted that it is hard to see how women in particular can lead modern lives. In Saudi Arabia a woman cannot drive or go to a mixed gym. *Sharia* seems to work better when there is recourse to a secular system, as there is in Bosnia and northern Nigeria. In Nigeria most Muslims do not bother to go through the federal legal system, because *sharia* is cheaper and quicker.

Turkey is quite different. Its courts are secular. Several of the erotic exhibits at its modern-art fair would have had Saudi Arabia's religious police reaching for their scimitars. But even Ataturk could not stop politics and Islam being intertwined.

Religion in Turkey is run by a government department. The *diyanet*'s main function is bureaucratic: it distributes money to mosques, regulates prayer times and so on. The current *diyanet* president, Ali Bardakoglu, who serves in the AK government, has followed a liberal course. Ms Tuksal approves of his fierce opposition to honour killings. He has also sent out the firm message that Christian evangelicals (who in the past have sometimes been beaten up) should be left alone.

This all sounds very enlightened. But does it make sense for religion to be answerable to the state? The same question could be asked about Britain, where the new prime minister, Gordon Brown, wants to get rid of his powers to appoint bishops, or about the money France spends on Catholicism. But it matters much more in the Islamic world.

Ms Tuksal is a refreshingly modern figure. But Islam plainly is different. Turkey marks the beginning of the faith's debate about the modern world, not the end.