

## **The Kemalists: Islamic Revival and the Fate of Secular Turkey**

*Muammer Kaylan*

*Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2005. 482 pages.*

The range of titles in Prometheus Books' "Islamic Studies" section is quite intriguing. According to its webpage, this "leading publisher in philosophy, popular science, and critical thinking" appears to be dedicated to covering Islamic-related topics of interest in a comprehensive manner for a post-9/11 western audience. Recent publications include *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (the author is a professor of medicine), *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance* (authored by the "director of Jihad Watch"), and *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* and *Why I Am not a Muslim* (both by the notorious Ibn Warraq).

The book under review fits into this series due to its apologetic character and narrow perspective on Islam – a perspective that sees political enunciations motivated by Islam as threatening and in direct contradiction to the (presumably universal) modern. The front book flap sets the tone and caters to a broad readership: "A clash of civilizations – between the secular traditions of the West and the fundamentalist Islamic revival in the East – has plunged the world into serious crisis."

First of all, it has to be stated that *The Kemalists* is neither an academic book nor an "Islamic Studies" book. It is filled with methodological problems and utterly incorrect statements about Islam. One particularly blatant example should suffice to make this point: On page 198, Kaylan lumps together as brotherhoods the "reactionary" Muslim Brotherhood, the "Shafis" (sic), the "Maliki Brotherhood," and the "liberal ... Melami and Bektashi brotherhoods" – apparently not understanding the differences between a modern Islamist movement, schools of law, and Sufi orders. To be fair, the author does not claim to be an Islamicist; however, it is disturbing to see how politically motivated treatises such as his gain publicity under an "Islamic Studies" label.

Kaylan was a leading Turkish journalist from the early 1950s until 1970, when he abruptly left the country after receiving death threats following a strongly worded front-page editorial against then-president Süleiman Demirel (pp. 32-35, 265f.). He moved to the United States, where he has since worked as a freelance journalist for the daily newspapers *Aksam* and *Sabah*, as well as for Reuters News Agency. In the 1960s, the heyday of his journalistic career, Kaylan was editor-in-chief of the daily *Hürriyet*.

What Kaylan offers is a mixture between an autobiography and a political narrative of modern Turkey designed for a broad, predominantly non-Turkish, audience (although the book came out in Turkish in 2006). The title is misleading, insofar as “the Kemalists” are not treated in any systematic way. “The Islamists” would have been a more appropriate title. The first part, in which the author draws mostly on his memoirs, is the most compelling. It provides an inside perspective on the workings of Turkish journalism during politically strongly contested times. He offers an interesting look into the technicalities of Turkish news production. For example, he describes how, in the early 1950s, some older journalists still wrote in the Arabic script (which had been replaced by the Latin script in 1928) and how their texts had to be transliterated before they went into print (p. 100). Such accounts make Kaylan’s memoirs a pleasurable read.

At the center of his narrative, however, is Turkish politics. Raised in a Kemalist and economically privileged family, Kaylan claims that his mother was Turkey’s first female dentist (p. 46). Kaylan began his journalistic career in 1950, when the first democratic elections initiated a new political era: the religiously more conservative Democratic party was voted in, thereby ending twenty-seven years of one-party rule by the Republican People’s party, which had been founded by Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk). In Kaylan’s account, this event initiated a story of decline that reached its apex in November 2002, with the electoral victory of the Justice and Development party.

Kaylan is obsessed with the theme of decline. In his excursions into history, narrating the Turkish conquest of Anatolia as well as selected parts of Ottoman history, he follows the paradigm of Ottoman decline according to which, after the “enlightened sultan” Süleyman the Magnificent in the mid-sixteenth century, “Islamic fanatics ... [were] introducing a dark era of coarse fundamentalism” (p. 352). In Kaylan’s view, this was temporarily halted by Atatürk, whose radical secularization and modernization politics following the Turkish War of Independence (1919-22) represent the apex of Turkish modernity. While he acknowledges that Atatürk, president of the new Turkish Republic from its inception in 1923 until his death in 1938,

was a “ruthless but enlightened dictator” (p. 64), he supports Atatürk’s vision of modern Turkey as a secular (in the Turkish context understood as “control of” rather than “freedom for” religion) and western country. In addition, he shares Atatürk’s suspicion of Muslim networks, especially Sufi brotherhoods and other “sects,” such as the diverse groups following the teachings of Said Nursi (1877-1960), whom he lumps together as the “Nur sect.”

For Kaylan, modern Turkish history unfolds in an almost Manichean struggle between secularist Kemalists and “[t]he fundamentalist Islamic extremists bent on establishing orthodox Muslim regimes [that] daily menace the world with terrorism in their efforts to rid the world of secular traditions” (back flap cover). He shares Kemalism’s anti-Islamic bias and operates with an essentialist notion of Islam: “Islam, influenced throughout the centuries by deviationist Arab and Iranian fundamentalists, is an unbendingly hard religion that rejects change. This is one of the reasons why I think it is difficult to modernize it or to turn it into an institution based on the rules of democracy” (p. 429).

Kaylan views the supporters of a stronger role for Islam in Turkish society, whom he labels without differentiation as “extremists,” “radicals,” “fundamentalists,” or “reactionaries” (i.e., the anti-Kemalists), as the enemy. In this worldview, modernity and Islam are incompatible. Accordingly, the Justice and Development government is employing *takiyye*, defined as “to give a wrong impression in order to mislead one’s opponent, even to lie about one’s real objectives and to behave hypocritically” (p. 421). Kaylan is further obsessed with the veil, which, for him, represents the “enslavement of the Muslim woman” (p. 323). The fact that a majority of the wives of the ruling party’s parliamentarians wear the hijab appears to prove, at least to him, the party’s anti-secular character (p. 420).

Unfortunately, the author makes no attempt to engage seriously with the concrete political program of any of the Islamically motivated groups he targets, nor does he show any interest in the motivation of those who constitute its base and who vote for its candidates. For him, political Islam’s success is grounded in the secularist parties’ corruption, and its success is reduced to a matter of deluding the people through false promises and systematic concealment of its leaders’ real goal: establishing a non-democratic Shari’ah state.

Kaylan’s perspective is thoroughly state-centered. Although he criticizes corruption and the lack of political freedom, he ultimately backs the state’s authoritarian structure, embodied in the military’s strong position, as a necessity in the face of the Islamic and Kurdish threats that it continues to face.

This perspective reduces the Kurdish question to a matter of security/terrorism and simply ignores the contested issue of the Young Turks' massacres of Armenians, arguably the first genocide of the twentieth century.

Despite its apparent biases, I recommend this book to readers with a strong interest in Turkish politics during the 1950s and the 1960s. As a political journalist in close personal contact with the leading figures of Turkish politics and the media world, Kaylan is able to provide interesting background information about some of that time's political intrigues. I further recommend the book to everybody who would like to get an inside view of the Kemalist mindset, of which Kaylan's historical memoirs represent a classical example.

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