



# THE MUSLIM WORLD

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE STUDY  
OF ISLAM AND OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM  
RELATIONSHIP IN PAST AND PRESENT

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SURVEY OF PERIODICALS

Volume

LXXX

No. 1

Published by

The Duncan Black Macdonald Center  
at Hartford Seminary

January

1990



## ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND WOMEN IN TURKEY

The phenomenon of Islamic revival preoccupies many observers of Turkish politics. Several questions are being raised: What are the roots of Islamic revival in "secular Turkey"?<sup>1</sup> Will Turkey be another Iran "falling prey" to an Islamic revolt?<sup>2</sup> Is there a "possibility of a mass uprising against central political authorities" on religious grounds?<sup>3</sup> What about the likelihood of a fundamental restructuring of Turkish society and politics under religious auspices?<sup>4</sup> Even though they duly recognize the importance of religion in the Ottoman-Turkish context, many authors are of the opinion that religious fundamentalism is not a threat that can undermine the secular foundations of the Turkish Republic. Religion, it is argued, has traditionally been under the control of the state in a society where there has been a strong state tradition.

Some changes seem to occur, however. The ANAP (Ana Partisi—The Mother Party) government which came to power in 1983 has loosened state control on religion. A party of center right, liberal in its economic outlook, ANAP attempted to merge within its ranks the different ideological positions that shaped the pre-1980 political scene. The party invited the center right, the center left, the religious right, and the nationalist right to join forces under its banner. The party program clearly stated the party's commitment to "national and moral values," underlined the importance of obligatory religious instruction in secondary schools, and of the party's commitment to guarantee freedom of religion.<sup>5</sup> At present, some prominent members of the party (such as the Party Chairman Kececiler, and the Minister of State Dincerler) are known to be sympathizers of the religious right.

Since its coming to power, the government has pursued active policies in the religious sphere. These include compulsory instruction rather than elective courses in the religion of Islam in both the elementary and secondary schools. Textbooks have been rewritten to communicate a national and religious message.<sup>6</sup> In cooperation with the Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports, and the Presidency of Religious Works, Qur'an courses are being taught in the secular elementary schools.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the government's interest in religious affairs led to the improvement of the organization of the pilgrimage to Mecca, to an

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<sup>1</sup> Serif Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey" in A. Kazancigil and E. Özbudun, eds., *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1981); "Ideology and Religion in the Turkish Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, II (1971); "Religion in Modern Turkey," *International Social Science Journal*, XXIX (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Ilkay Sunar and Binnaz Toprak, "Islam in Politics: The Case of Turkey," *Government and Opposition*, XVIII, No. 4 (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Metin Hepar, "Islam, Polity and Society in Turkey: A Middle Eastern Perspective," *MEJ*, XXXV, No. 3 (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Sabri Sayari, "Politicization of Islamic Re-Traditionalism: Some Preliminary Notes," in Metin Hepar and R. Israeli, eds., *Islam and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1984).

<sup>5</sup> *Anavatan Partisi Programi* (Ankara: Semih Ofset, 1983), pp. 9, 12, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Nokta*, August 11, 1985, No. 31, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Milliyet*, July 21, 1986.

increase in the number of mosque personnel, and to the extension of religious services to Turkish citizens abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Many politicians of the ANAP have personally encouraged religious activism. Prime Minister Ozal makes it publicly known that he is a practicing Muslim as far as his public duties allow him<sup>9</sup>; and in his speeches he refers frequently to God and to God's will.<sup>10</sup> During the month of Ramadan, it has become a social convention among the political elite to host *iftar* dinners. Increased interest in attending prayer services by practicing Muslim politicians has necessitated the construction of a new mosque near the Parliament because the old one is unable to accommodate the overflow of participants,<sup>11</sup> and, according to newspapers' reports, steadily growing numbers of ANAP representatives make the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>12</sup>

Newspapers and magazines also report an increased activity of illegal sects that have gone underground.<sup>13</sup> Books on Islam and religious teachings proliferate. Students and parents demand that small mosques be opened in schools.<sup>14</sup> The number of women covering their heads in observance of Islamic rites is definitely increasing among the middle aged as well as among the students who attend universities. On the other hand, incidences are reported where parents complain that their daughters are urged to cover their heads in religious classes.<sup>15</sup>

Within the broader framework of the ongoing discussion on Turkish women and the role which Islam plays in their lives and in the ways they are viewed and treated,<sup>16</sup> there is one particular issue on which many unanswered questions continue to exist: that of the place of "fundamentalist" women within the larger community of Turkish Muslim women. By a brief discussion of a Turkish women's journal representing the revivalist position, this article seeks to make a contribution to a fuller understanding of this segment of the Turkish population.

The journal, *Kadin ve Aile* ("Women and Family," hereafter referred to as *KA*), is a monthly which began publication on April 1985. Istanbul correspondents have informed me that *KA* is the sister magazine of *Islam*, a weekly on current affairs, and of *Ilm ve Sanat* (Science and Art), a bimonthly journal. According to figures provided by its distributor (Hur Dagitim), about 4500 copies are sold monthly in addition to the subscriptions. The total figure is quite high, considering the fact that most popular weeklies on current events sell about 10,000 copies

<sup>8</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı ve Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü 1985 Mali Yılı Bütçeleri Üzerine Devlet Bakanı Kâzım Oksay'ın T.B.M.M. Genel Kurulunda Yaptığı Konuşmalar (Speeches made by the Minister of State Kâzım Oksay in the Turkish Grand National Assembly General Session on the 1985 Financial Year Budget of Presidency of Public Works and General Directorate of Foundations) pp. 11, 9, 13.

<sup>9</sup> See *Nokta*, June 16, 1985, pp. 20-22 for his relation to religious leaders.

<sup>10</sup> T. Özal, Başbakan Turgut Özal'ın 1985 Mali Yılı Bütçesinin Tümü Üzerindeki Konuşması (Speech of Prime Minister T. Özal on the 1985 Financial Year Budget, Istanbul, Aksoy Matbaacılık, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, July 31, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, July 29, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> *Nokta*, October 6, 1986, pp. 12-20.

<sup>14</sup> *Nokta*, May 18, 1986, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Nokta*, June 30, 1985, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> On Islam and women see Binnaz Toprak, "Religion and Turkish Women" in N. Abadan-Unat, ed., *Women in Turkish Society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), also B. Toprak "Emancipated but Unliberated Women in Turkey: The Impact of Islam," paper, 1985, to be published in Ferhunde Özbay, ed., "The Study of Women in Turkey."



in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> While the owner is a man, on whose initiative the magazine began publication, the editors, assistant editors, publishing managers, and the majority of the contributors are all women.

Even though it would not be without interest to discuss the journal as it relates to ANAP policies, our focus is rather on its significance in the context of feminist ideology. A point of primary importance in this connection is the tension arising from the need to stress women's equality and equal rights with men on the one hand and, on the other, the basic differences between men and women. Recognition of women's distinct identities and sources of strength, different from those of men, has enriched the feminist consciousness. Women's experiences in the private realm and in their traditional roles equip them with important talents and capabilities that the dominant culture relentlessly dismisses. Qualities of caring and responsibilities are now a central concern for many feminists who seek political power in order to publicize their message that women are "different but equal."

Problems emerge because the emphasis on the differences between women and men has precarious implications. Even when the aim is to give women a new voice and further leverage, exaltation of the female realm and female virtues might help to perpetuate women's subordination. Feminists, then, frequently need to differentiate their stance from that of the conservative groups who seek to preserve the status quo. In order to assess whether, and if so, to what extent, *KA* is following a line different from that of the conservative groups, it seems worthwhile to consider the answer Katzenstein and Laitin<sup>18</sup> gave to the question they articulated as follows: "under what formulations are arguments of moral difference likely to serve progressive ends and when are they likely to fulfill counter-progressive or reactionary purposes?"<sup>19</sup> The three criteria the author established to determine whether a group is progressive are:

1. that the group understands its social and political role in a dynamic, not in a static manner, i.e., not merely reasserting rights and privileges but assuring expansion of opportunities and enrichment of autonomy;
2. that the group's leaders seek, on the one hand, to nurture and promote diversity across its ranks and, on the other, to remedy differences in mobility prospects vertically among its members;
3. that the political project of the group involves entry into an alliance that is committed to the expansion of opportunities and political power for other disadvantaged classes of groups.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at *KA* with these criteria in mind, the first criterion in particular seems relevant and deserves careful attention. It is unmistakably clear that the journal represents a conservative political point of view. The lead editorial of the first issue defines its audience as follows:

You are, in our eyes, *hajjī* mothers and aunts with pinked prayer (*namaz*) scarves, with rosaries in your hands, and prayers on your lips. Or else,

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Mete Tunçay for helping me find the figures.

<sup>18</sup> M.F. Katzenstein and D.D. Laitin, "Politics, Feminism, and the Ethics of Caring," in *Women and Moral Theory*, eds., E.F. Kittay and D.T. Meyers (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

serious, compassionate and self-sacrificing housewives, loyal to their husbands and homes. Or else, pretty, clean, twittering, talented little sisters. . . . We know that the female bird makes the nest. . . . You are the ones who raise the children healthy; you are the ones who teach manners and give good breeding; with lullabies, advice and prayers you direct them. Men become happy and successful because of you; when they come home, they forget the exhaustion of the day, clamor and turmoil of life, find consolation in you, sleep happily and contented.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, *KA* chooses to address a stereotypically domesticated group of housewives destined to lead their submissive, nurturing lives under religious benediction. The editorial reminds the readers of the ḥadith which says that “Heaven is under the feet of the believing mother.” Women’s rights and responsibilities are clearly defined and confined to the familial realm, and any possibility of expansion of opportunities and autonomy is strictly foreclosed:

There are those bad intentioned and crooked-minded in the press who try to alienate the housewife from her nest, her close relatives, her principal duties; suck her into fashion and show; draw her into sensuality, pleasure, vulgarity, pornography, alcohol, gambling, flirting and deviant relationships. . . . They try to destroy the family that is the foundation of society and tear out the ties between the individuals<sup>22</sup>

The stringent bundle of “forbiddens” where sensuality, pleasure and flirting—along with poronography and vulgarity—are denied to women, leaves little doubt that the journal seeks to propagate a restrictive lifestyle for women.

This impression is confirmed by the content of later issues. Lists of restrictions are presented and justified as God’s will or the Prophet’s preference. Accordingly, to give some examples, abortion is firmly rejected—as the November 1985 issue makes clear that has the caption: “Murdering Children is Called Abortion.” Although divorce is permissible in Islam, divorce is discouraged. The main argument is that “God does not like it.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, divorce means homeless children and disintegration of family life. To discourage working outside the home, the June 1985 issue focuses on “Problems of ‘Working Women.’” An interview with a religious gynecologist underlines the difficulties of meeting one’s primary responsibilities to the family when one has a job outside.<sup>24</sup> Pornography is condemned because it threatens family life.<sup>25</sup> The trend to follow the newest fashion brings innumerable vices: it makes (Turkish) women reject their past, invites arrogance, and means succumbing to cultural imperialism of the West<sup>26</sup> and, of course, it is against religion because the Prophet has asked the believers not to wear clothes with which non-believers adorn themselves.<sup>27</sup> Unisex clothing is particularly condemned as it blurs the sex-role distinctions between men and women.

Are there, in *KA*, beyond all this prohibitive ideology, any traces of what Kat-

<sup>21</sup> M.E.C. “Amacimiz” (Our Goal) in *KA*, April 1985, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *KA*, March 1986, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> “Dr. Gülsen Ataseven ile Görüşтік” (We talked with Dr. G. A.), *KA*, June 1985, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *KA*, January 1986.

<sup>26</sup> *KA*, February 1986, pp. 8–9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



zenstein and Laitin described as a dynamic role, expanding opportunities for women and enriching their autonomy? There are reasons to answer this question in the affirmative. Perhaps unintended, the journal provides many a woman an exposure to the public realm. As stated earlier, with few exceptions, all those who write in the magazine are women. Three of the senior editors are married, housewives with children, the other two are university educated unmarried women. One of those for whom involvement with the magazine has meant a rewarding sense of identity is the assistant editor who writes:

I am a graduate of business school. I attended Ataturk Kiz Lisesi before that. My family is a "modern" one; but then what is "modernity." It was in the university that we began to question the "modernity" of our families and to discuss the nature of God's path. Among a group of friends, we decided we would not succumb to imitation of Western ways, that we would protest blue jeans and open dresses and we began to gradually cover ourselves. I did not want to have an outside job because you are readily harassed, but this job is perfectly suited for me. It allows me to work for what I believe in.

Ironically, the journal, with its restrictive ideology, allows this person to assert her autonomy. She can thus explore her interests rather than succumb to what is considered appropriate by her parents—becoming, probably, a university educated housewife of a middle class gentleman. And this person is certainly not the only one for whom *KA* has created an opportunity to enter the public realm.

Even though there is no question that the ideology of *KA* is inherently restrictive, there might be unintended implications of its practice. Observance of Islamic dictates, as the magazine encourages women to do, might allow them to develop social networks and skills outside the immediate family.<sup>28</sup> Mevlud sessions (with a recital of poems celebrating the birth of the Prophet, e.g., poems such as those written by Suleyman Celebi), or gatherings held in memory of a deceased person), and Qur'an reading sessions, attendance at mosques, celebration of religious holidays, weddings, and circumcision ceremonies, although largely sex-segregated activities, might encourage women to develop organizational skills, and managerial capabilities. As anthropologists aptly observe, such religious activities can provide "opportunities for participation in and manipulation of several systems of exchange,"<sup>29</sup>—vertical exchange between the pious observer and God as well as horizontal exchange within the community of believers. Consistent with its religious ideology, *KA* also encourages women to develop skills at handicrafts and calligraphy: a handicraft competition is held,<sup>30</sup> and a calligraphy exhibition of women's works is organized.<sup>31</sup>

Such events are opportunities for women to acquire a taste of public life and to extend the private into the public realm. In the context of a society where there is no imminent threat of religious takeover, these activities, in due time, might become secularized sources of power for women.

Finally, *KA*, despite its restrictive ideology, introduces the concept of "individ-

<sup>28</sup> Emelie A. Olson, "Religious Tourism, Koran Readers and Adak: Women's Extra-Domestic Activities and their Impact on Family Dynamics," unpublished paper, 1985, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *KA*, October 1985, August 1985.

<sup>31</sup> *KA*, December 1985.

ual rights." The magazine asserts the right of women to observe Islam as they choose. In Turkey, there is a major controversy concerning women covering their heads in public institutions.<sup>32</sup> Secular Kemalist ideology is most concretely challenged by religious forces in the dispute. *KA* consistently defends women's right to cover their heads in public institutions, especially in schools and in universities.<sup>33</sup> To explore the issue, interviews are held with notable public figures including women leaders who disapprove of headscarves (i.e., Turkan Akyol)<sup>34</sup>, but who admit that it is an individual right. Housewives or young students who cover their heads because it is God's will find out that it is also their individual right. Article 24 of the Constitution and Article 175 of Law 3255, as they read them, provide guarantees for freedom of religion.<sup>35</sup> As citizens of the polity they are informed that their votes do count. "One day," the editor addresses the readers, "leaders of the country will come to us for votes and want to strengthen their hopes for political power. And then we shall have answers to give."<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, according to some, the use of headscarves leads to discrimination. A research article in the magazine, named "Are There Blacks in My Country?" aims to make the analogy between blacks who are discriminated against and women who cover their heads.<sup>37</sup> Above and beyond its religious veneer, *KA* might well be initiating its clientele into ideologies which in the long run can be used to challenge the confines of Islam. It would be foolhardy to claim that *KA* is a progressive journal, but there are traces of dynamism that might, in the long run, undermine the restrictive religious ideology propagated.

The second criterion that we use to assess the magazine requires that the claims made enhance diversity without aggravating class inequality.<sup>38</sup> On this score, within its religious ideology, *KA* does attempt to encourage diversity among women. Articles on Muslim women from different parts of the world frequently appear in the magazine. Women of Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Somalia are introduced.<sup>39</sup> Solidarity with Afghan immigrant women is encouraged.<sup>40</sup> An interview with a Surinamese woman who converted to Islam is used to censure persecution of Muslim children in Surinam.<sup>41</sup> Another interview with an Iranian woman parliamentarian, very uncritically and approvingly, acquaints the *KA* audience with the rights and privileges of Iranian women under the Khomeini regime. Malaysian women are made to explain how they can practice Islam without the government intervention (i.e., attend public schools with their heads covered) in their countries.<sup>42</sup>

Such attempts to encourage diversity, however, are circumscribed within a

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<sup>32</sup> A case study is provided in Emelie Olson "Muslim Identity and Secularism in Contemporary Turkey: 'The Headscarf Dispute,'" *Anthropological Quarterly*, LVIII, No. 4 (October 1985).

<sup>33</sup> *KA*, December 1985 and June 1986 issues have cover stories on the subject.

<sup>34</sup> *KA*, December 1985, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> *KA*, June 1986, "Bayrami Zülümle Yasatıyorlar" (They make us live through Bayram under Terror), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *KA*, June 1986, Adile Oduncu "Ülkemde Zenciler mi Var?" (Are There Blacks in My Country), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Katzenstein and Laitin, *Women and Moral Theory*, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> *KA*, June 1985, pp. 24-25, October 1985, pp. 11-13, April 1986, pp. 24-27.

<sup>40</sup> *KA*, July 1985, pp. 8-9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>42</sup> *KA*, August 1985.



rather intolerant Islamic framework. Solidarity of women of different backgrounds or nationalities is confined to their common Islamic bond. Non-Muslim women of the West are systematically disparaged. Women's rights and women's liberation movements are rejected because, the magazine claims, they are merely the problems of Western women.<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Western Christian women who have converted to Islam are used to uphold Islam.<sup>44</sup>

When we turn to our third criterion, regarding alliance with progressive groups, we know that the journal is explicitly in alliance with Islamic revivalist groups. Ideology of Islam regarding women is patriarchal.<sup>45</sup> Yet to the extent that it is contained within the Republican polity, the movement (if we can call it so) can provide opportunities to enrich the secular Kemalist culture.

*KA* is a conservative women's journal. However, conservative as it is, it might provide tools and opportunities for women to seek an alternative way of life. Seeking a prohibitive way of life is not to be commended; but the search for an alternative might eventually recognize the confines of the goal and channel the tools acquired to a liberating end.

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<sup>43</sup> "Bizim Olmayan Problem" (A problem that is not ours), *KA*, April 1986, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *KA*, August 1985.

<sup>45</sup> See Toprak's article mentioned in note 16.