

## Turkish Hindsight: *Muslim Roots, Secular Minds.*

Review by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad

Graham Fuller. *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2007. \$14.95.

After eight decades of self-imposed exile on the periphery of Islamic affairs, Turkey is again emerging as a potentially major influence in the development of the Muslim world. Graham Fuller, in his book *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, demonstrates that he is an analyst of scholarly temperament and sound perception. He has thoughtfully assembled and organized the essential information that scholars, policymakers, and pundits in any way concerned with the Muslim world need

to know about Turkey at this moment in history.

After a short introduction concisely stating the objectives of the work, the book is in three parts titled "Turkey's Historical Trajectory," "Turkey's Relations with the Muslim World," and "Turkey's Future Trajectory." The first and last of these cover what the titles indicate, while the second also deals with Turkey's relations with Israel, Eurasia, Europe, the United States, and the Muslim world.

Throughout the book, Fuller emphasizes that Turkey's self-identification as a European state is a phase. Both Turkey's roots in the Middle East and the nature of recent historical events necessitate a reconsideration of Turkey's place in the world. Turkey's identity is complex, its history is rich—richer than Turkish elites care to admit—and its interests are wide-reaching.

Naturally, Fuller places appropriate

emphasis on the Ottoman predecessors of the modern Turkish republic and on the revolutionary impact of Kemal Atatürk's forcible establishment of a secular republic. Fuller masterfully navigates the problematic nuances of an authoritarian democracy. He draws on the important multiplicities of the Turkish experience—a democratic republic with military oversight; an enforced secularity imposed on a Muslim society colored by a deep spirituality; and a pragmatically cooperative relationship with Israel in spite of popular sympathy for the Palestinians—to explain how today's complex relations between Turkey and the rest of the world have emerged.

*The New Turkish Republic* also explains how American policymakers have misread Turkey. Fuller remarks that expectations that Turkey would “be a natural partner and source of support in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), back U.S. military operations in the region, and [...] continue to be an enduring symbol of anti-Islamist ideology [...] did not materialize as Washington had hoped.”<sup>1</sup> A careful reading of Fuller's text will reward the reader with an understanding of why these hopes didn't materialize, which will better equip readers to avoid such errors in the future.

In his analysis of the historical trajectory of Turkey, Fuller traces how the late Ottoman Empire's attraction to the strengths of the West and dissatisfaction with Muslim—especially Arab—shortcomings, motivated “a conscious effort to synthesize Islamic ideas with those of the Western enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> Fuller argues that the vision was a pan-Islamic one, and that before 1914, whatever differences the Turks had with the Arabs, they were not nationalistic in character.

It was Kemalism, not a romanticized “Arab revolt,” that split Turkey from the

Arab and broader Muslim world, according to Fuller. Because the caliphate was perceived as an obstacle to Turkish nationalism, its abolition was “roughly akin to a snap decision by an Italian prime minister to abolish the papacy without consultation with the worldwide Catholic community.”<sup>3</sup> The extreme steps in the rejection of Islam—such as the replacement of the Arabic script with Latin characters and the purging of words of Arab or Persian origin from the language—have had a devastating effect on Turkish self-perception. Turks cannot use their own Ottoman historical archives, but must rely on Western sources for an understanding of their Ottoman past. Islam is the main connection between the Turks and the Arabs, and its removal from public life has split the two groups in an unprecedented manner.

The rise of the Soviet Union and its threat to Turkish territorial integrity under Stalin precipitated an abandonment of Kemalist neutrality and moved Turkey into alignment with the Western powers. Fuller amply demonstrates that Turkey's enthusiasm in support of Western positions was sometimes so extreme that it was almost embarrassing. Fuller notes that, when communists seemed to be in a position to seize power in Damascus in 1957, “Turkey threatened to unilaterally invade [Syria]” and the United States and United Kingdom had to caution it against doing so.<sup>4</sup> Fuller goes on to point out, “In 1958, Turkey unsuccessfully called for Western military intervention in Iraq to restore the monarchy after its overthrow.”<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s it was Turkey's turn to be embarrassed by American insensitivity to its interests, exemplified by the Cuban missile crisis and U.S. policies towards Cyprus.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the refugee prob-

lem caused by the establishment of Israel and the humiliation of the Arab states by its subsequent military successes prompted the evolution of the countries on Turkey's borders into "security states" ruled by authoritarian—often military—regimes. Many Arab leaders were turning towards the Soviet Union, giving rise to a reconsideration of Turkey's "single-minded strategic commitment to the United States."<sup>7,8</sup> Turkey returned to its

characterized by "the state's *impartiality* towards every form of religious belief and philosophical conviction [...]" and the fact that "[...] the state, rather than the individual is restricted by this."<sup>12</sup>

As a result, Fuller notes, three groups found themselves empowered: "a new and growing Anatolian business class, traditional lower classes in the cities, and a new and growing Islamic professional and intellectual class that, while modern,

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Kemalist neutrality, not taking sides in the Iran-Iraq war.

Fuller appropriately places great stress on the importance of Turgut Özal's role in turning economic policy into "a driving force in Turkish foreign policy."<sup>9</sup> Özal temporarily broke with the neutrality policy to side with the United States in the 1991 Iraq War, but the experience was costly for Turkey in a variety of ways, including the problems engendered by the flow of Kurdish refugees. As a result, Turks became even more wary of the wisdom of supporting U.S. regional policies, and the stage was set for Necmitten Erbakan to succeed in establishing a successful Islamic political party for the first time in the republic's history.<sup>10</sup> Although Erbakan's party was eventually deprived of power by the military, it paved the way for the more spectacular success of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and the "largely apolitical communitarian movement of Fethullah Gülen."<sup>11</sup> The increasing democratization of Turkey has caused the radical French-style secularism of the elites to give way to a more moderate, American-style secularism,

still finds meaningful identity in Muslim tradition."<sup>13</sup> Fuller quotes Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül's assertion that "[at] the time that people are talking about a clash of civilizations, Turkey is a natural bridge of civilizations."<sup>14</sup> It is the moderates who stand to benefit the most from the liberalization of Turkish society.

Fuller is inclined to accept the claim of Gül's movement that its purpose is societal reform, and not, as its radical, secular critics claim, the political power to impose their vision of Islamic law on the rest of Turkish society. He notes that "[o]ne of the Gülen movement's greatest accomplishments—and a demonstration of its search for greater universalism—has come through a remarkable process of intellectual outreach, a series of roundtables called the Abant Forum" which has brought together "Muslims, secularists, traditionalists, modernists, atheists, Christians, leftists, and conservatives—to hammer out common positions."<sup>15</sup> These positions include an opposition to state dictation of clothing codes that either mandate or ban any form of reli-

gious dress or expression.

The second part of the book is split into ten chapters dealing with Turkey's current relations with various parts of the world. In the chapter on "JDP Policies Toward the Muslim World," Fuller argues that "Turkey has moved away from viewing Iraqi events entirely through a Kurdish prism and has developed ties" with various groups, both Sunni and Shi'a.<sup>16</sup> Talks held with Syria allow Turkey to speak frankly about needed reforms in ways that the intransigent American administration cannot. Turkey has demonstrated its independence from the United States with regard to Iran even more strongly—as shown when "the staunchly secular President [Ahmet Necdet] Sezer visited Iran" in the wake of President Bush's "axis of evil" speech.<sup>17</sup> The JDP has maintained "close working ties with Israel" even as it demonstrates "greater involvement in the Palestinian problem" and spoke out forcefully "against Israel's excessive use of force" in the 2006 invasion of Lebanon.<sup>18,19,20</sup> Turkey's warming towards the Organization of Islamic Conference reached a climax when "Turkey actually assumed the chairmanship of the OIC" in 2004.<sup>21</sup>

In the eighth chapter Fuller examines what he calls "The Foundations of Turkey's Regional Influence." He considers the roles of military modernization, peacekeeping efforts, economic, financial and labor factors, energy and water policies, as well as the Kurdish problem and pan-Turkism as factors pulling Turkey back into a closer relationship with the Middle East. Fuller then explores the dynamics between Turkey and Syria, and its implications with respect to Israel. He moves on to a chapter focused on Turkey and Iraq, which gives special attention to border

issues like Mosul, Kirkuk and the Turkmen, and the various wars. As a result of the current war, Fuller states, most "Turkish circles across the ideological and political spectrum...now believe that the United States has become a typical imperial power marching in the footsteps of past European imperialism [...]" and that a Kurdish state is about to be created that will destabilize the region and become the same "source of discord, conflict, and struggle" as Israel is viewed to be.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between Turkey and Iran, as Fuller explains, has been long, complex and without significant Sunni-Shi'a hostility. While the Kurdish problem and issues regarding Turkic speakers in Iran are points of friction, the two nations have been remarkably successful at maintaining their cordiality: "Foreign Minister Gül has made efforts to maintain regular ties with Tehran, but he has also offered some friendly criticism; he has publicly stated that all countries must open themselves up to internal criticism and self-examination."<sup>23</sup> Although Turkey is deeply concerned about the prospect of nuclear weapons in Iran, "it also fears that U.S. policies will only push Iran to move more rapidly and dangerously in the nuclear direction."<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 12, on "Turkey and Israel," makes intelligible Turkey's working relationship with Israel. Fuller also explores other regional relationships, and examines the varied strategic and political factors that govern Turkey's current position in the world. His section on "Turkey and Eurasia" does the same for Turkey's relationships with the Russian and Central Asian republics and other parts of Asia. Fuller provides insight on the increasing levels of trade with various partners and on Russia's role as an

important energy supplier and as a complement to the West as a source of military hardware.<sup>25</sup> He also predicts that “pan-Turkic identities may grow stronger with democratization.”<sup>26</sup> He notes that Prime Minister “Erdogan has wisely sought to turn the highly contentious issue of past Ottoman massacres of Armenians over to an international scholarly panel for resolution rather than to leave it to politicians to pass historical judgment.”<sup>27</sup>

The chapter focusing on the U.S.-Turkey relationship starts by explaining the close affiliation between these two countries in the five decades of the Cold War, in which the United States “facilitated Turkey’s entry into the Western alliance [...] securing its position as a ‘Western’ state and beneficiary of Western largesse.”<sup>28</sup> The strength of this closeness has had perverse effects on Turkish-Arab relations. Yet, despite this relationship, the U.S.-Turkey relationship has had its points of tension. Fuller cites examples of such tensions, including American pressure in 1972 “to ban all poppy production in Turkey—an entirely legal and supervised process for Turkey’s significant pharmaceutical industry”—the Kurdish refugee problem from the first Gulf War, and the U.S. Congress’s repeated attempts to make political hay out of the Armenian massacres.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the

domestic efforts of neoconservatives to paint religious Turks as a threat to the West fly in the face of the fact that polls show that supporters of the JDP have “consistently held more moderate views toward the United States than did supporters of two other major Turkish parties.”<sup>30</sup>

Turkey’s future trajectory is covered in two chapters, “Turkey’s Future Foreign Policy Scenarios,” and in the conclusion, “What Can Washington Do?” The bottom line in Fuller’s *The New Turkish Republic* is that Turkey will have to choose from among three options: a Washington-centric policy, a Euro-centric policy, or a Turko-centric policy. Turkey, understandably, will seek to put its own interests at the center, and Fuller argues that such a course could also serve the long-term interests of the United States if the United States makes certain key policy changes. These include opening dialogues with Turkey’s neighbors Syria and Iran, as well as making meaningful positive efforts to settle the Palestinian-Israeli dispute.<sup>31</sup> I believe that Fuller’s analysis is accurate and constructive and that American policymakers will do well to take it into account.

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#### NOTES

1 Graham Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington DC, U.S. Institute of Peace Press), 7.

2 *Ibid.*, 20.

3 *Ibid.*, 26.

4 *Ibid.*, 35.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 36.

8 *Ibid.*, 37.

9 *Ibid.*, 40.

10 *Ibid.*, 41.

11 *Ibid.*, 49.

12 *Ibid.*, 50.

13 *Ibid.*, 49.

14 *Ibid.*, 51.

15 *Ibid.*, 63.

16 *Ibid.*, 71.

17 *Ibid.*, 73.

18 *Ibid.*, 76.

19 *Ibid.*, 75.

20 *Ibid.*, 77.

21 *Ibid.*, 78.

22 *Ibid.*, 102.

23 *Ibid.*, 110.

24 *Ibid.*, III.

25 *Ibid.*, 129.

26 *Ibid.*, 132.

27 *Ibid.*, 135.

28 *Ibid.*, 147.

29 *Ibid.*, 149.

30 *Ibid.*, 152.

31 *Ibid.*, 171.