

# Plural Islamism in Plural Modernities

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the trajectory of Islamism as a modern phenomenon. It demonstrates that, having evolved under the influence of myriad political, intellectual and historical developments of the past two hundred years, the concept is still surrounded by various debates, movements, acts of violence, ideologies, policies and positions. Islamism also continues to be a significant element in Turkey's political and intellectual life as well. The article then engages several critical questions. Has Islamism reached its end? Is a new type of Islamism emerging? Is post-Islamism on the horizon. In response, the article argues that Islamism's diversification –as opposed to its end– leads the movement to survive as pluralities that result from structural changes stemming from global and plural modernities' interaction with societies. In line with social and political organizations' pursuit of violence, poverty, challenge, reconciliation and alliance, Islamism too is being plurally reconstructed.

**I**slamism is an approach that emerged under the influence of political, intellectual and historical developments of the past two hundred years. Various debates, movements, acts of violence, ideologies, policies and positions surround the concept. In Turkey's political and intellectual life, too, Islamism continues to be a significant element. As both Turkey and the broader region undergo large-scale transformation, Islamism also receives its share of change.

At a historical junction where the Arab Spring sweeps across the Islamic world, democratic Islamic movements bloom and chaos and conflict takes place, Islamism once again moves toward crucial diversification. At the same time, Turkey continues to experience a major transformation under the Justice and Development Party (JDP). All these bring up the following questions: Have we reached the end of Islamism? Is this

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already the time for post-Islamism? Or is a new type of Islamism emerging? These claims all bear considerable importance.

In this paper, I argue that Islamism's diversification –as opposed to its end–leads the movement to survive as pluralities that result from structural changes stemming from global and plural modernities' interaction with societies. In this context, I claim that Islamism's ideological and normative aspects have been transformed as part of the movement's historical experiences, even though a considerable part of its contents relates

velop a standard definition of Islamism to facilitate political analyses. Such clarity is needed, given that Islamism continues to influence politics, professional networks and values of those that interpret it. However, Islam's frequent association with conflict and terrorism, particularly in the post-9/11 period, as well as terrorists' frequent referencing of Islam to increase attention to their acts, has resulted in Islamism being discussed using the most exclusionary and reductionist paradigms possible.

Due to some political positions and individual agenda, it is common for observers to view Islamism using reductionist lenses. In this sense, Islamism tends to be understood as a political program, a religion's instrumentalization toward political ends, and a quest for theocratic state: "...a form

of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition."<sup>1</sup>

The reductionist interpretation defines Islamism as an approach that assigns Islam an instrumental role in a political project. This perspective seems to dominate recent accounts by Western observers. It is a reductionist interpretation that ignores the intellectual pursuit behind the idea, reduces over two centuries of the history of the idea to just

## The experience of extreme secularization and modernization excluded Islam from social life as the faith became deprived of its means of political representation and participation

to ideology and an ahistoric discourse. In line with social and political organizations' pursuit of violence, poverty, challenge, reconciliation and alliance, I make the case that Islamism too is being plurally reconstructed.

### The Problem of Defining Islamism: Reductionist and Exclusionary Interpretations

As debates on Islamism gain increasing visibility, Islamism in turn becomes harder to define and describe as a result of the increase in knowledge, approaches and different studies. At the same time, however, there emerges a need to de-

the post-Cold War period, and centers itself exclusively around its political perspective. These reductionist accounts of Islamism can be seen in the descriptions of the political goals of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and other Islamic movements that have filled the ideological void in the post-Cold War Middle East. Furthermore, these accounts see Islamism as an unchanging, normative idea.

The reductionist approach has not only solely defined Islamism as an ideological project but has also developed an exclusionary position as it also sees Islamism as an “other.” In other words, as the Cold War ideologies have lost their influence, the international powers have instrumentalized Islam as ideology in order to compensate for their need for a new “other.” In this sense, all Islamic movements are tagged as Islamist and identified as solely political, and even violent, enterprises. Another problematic aspect of this reductionism is its treatment of all Islamic formations and movements as one. Under the term “political Islam”, there is an effort to reduce all the variation, diversity and plurality in Islamic movements into a single object. While Tunisia’s En-Nahda, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and the National Outlook in Turkey are indeed Islamic movements, they have, notwithstanding their common aspects, major differences. Similarly, while En-Nahda and others endorse an Islamic vision of politics, they do not represent

a brand of Islamism, such as al-Qaeda, that approves of violence, prioritizes integritism and altogether rejects the modern world. Much like the Muslim Brotherhood, En-Nahda and National Outlook are able to develop Islamist perspectives amenable to restructuring in their attempt to harmonize Islam and democracy.

Overcoming the problem of defining Islamism is of particular importance, so that the analysis can move to a social scientific perspective. If Islamism can be discussed with reference to its many aspects, this may render it easier to comprehend. As a result, Islamism must be analyzed in its factual and normative capacities and from pluralist social scientific perspectives. In addition to its intellectual and ideological aspects, Islamism ought to be examined with reference to its attempts at participating in civil society and the public arena. Islamism is a current that emerged in a certain social and historical context. The reductionist approach, seeing this phenomenon as an intangible, ahistoric and extra-social phenomenon,

**Islamism served as a platform upon which political and ideological demands could be formulated in response to exclusion**

comprised merely of various religious norms, makes it impossible to include it in the social sciences’ domain. This, in turn, prevents the emergence of different ways through which one may think about, speak of, and discuss Islamism.



Photo: REUTERS, Jeff Christensen

Women pray at the first public mixed-gender Muslim prayer service in New York.

Both the fundamentalists and reductionists prefer to focus on certain norms, and thereby deprive Islamism of its historical and social context.

### **The History of Islamism: Three Periods, Three Approaches**

Islamism emerged, developed and was organized in the historical circumstances of the past two centuries, during both the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and then the Cold War, and it was formed under the hegemony of colonialism and then later the nation-state. Therefore, it bears traces of the ruptures, transformations, novelties and conflicts of these historical conditions.

In other words, Islamism is an intellectual and political movement that has been developed in the modern era over the past 150 years. This historical context makes it easier for us to grasp Islamism in a more realistic manner.

There is little doubt that Islamism has some ahistoric, even romantic, aspects due to its ideological traits. The movement's engendering of the "Islamic Golden Age" utopia that it seeks to replicate in the present, by-passing any historical processes, demonstrates its ahistoricism. It is correct that Islam has been re-invented and turned into a political ideology: "Islamists' reinvention of religion as a political ideology and not a theological or socio-cultural

construct provides the tools for dehistoricizing Islam and to separate it from the various tempo-spatial contexts in which Islam has been practiced over the fourteen hundred years.”<sup>2</sup>

However, it is rather problematic to examine the ideological and social currents based on the normative definition alone. Islamism should also be interpreted by looking at the societal patterns, political relations and modes of production in which it operates, as opposed to its norms, ideals and values. After all, it is through these elements that the ideals of Islam have become secularized and have turned into the movements that are collectively referred to as Islamism. In this context, Islamism is a highly historical concept, an interpretation of Islam in the context of two centuries of modernity. Islamism’s visibility within this history similarly has significant importance for its identification as a comprehensible idea.

Islamism initially developed for the purpose of saving the Ottoman state and reconciling Islam with modernity’s normative values. While Western observers identified this idea as pan-Islamism in the 1870s, Ottoman intellectuals and administrators interpreted it as Unity of Islam (*Ittihad-i Islam*). Namık Kemal used this idea in his call to protect the Muslim population of the Caucasus in the face of Russian advances. It was a government official who wrote the treatise on the Unity of Islam in 1872 and

distributed it across the Islamic world as part of Sultan Abdulhamid II’s policy to counter the increasingly strong influence of Britain, France and Russia. Simply put, the pamphlet called on all Muslims to *jihad*.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Islamism emerged as a movement mobilized around the main goal of “saving the state.” However, it assumed the guise of a more intellectual current of thought during the Second Constitutional Period.

Islamism restructured itself as a new *Weltanschauung* following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire when it devel-

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oped a theory of the Islamic state that opposed the construction of a new kind of politics that excluded religious institutions, worldview and actors. It was no coincidence that this idea of an Islamic state first emerged following the Caliphate’s abolishment.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the new concept aimed at filling the void that emerged with the collapse of the Caliphate. Again, we observe that Rashid Reza was the first to employ this term and he turned to this approach following various meetings on the future of the Caliphate. Of course, one of the most important reasons that this political

theory emerged in the first place was the exclusion of Islam from all institutions and activities through which the new political order produced meaning. This, in turn, motivated intellectuals and groups for whom their Muslim identity served as their main reference point to search for a new Islamic politics.

Islamism underwent an ideological transformation during the Cold War,

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as it was subjected to the stark political conditions of the era. The movement tried to develop a position vis-à-vis capitalist and communist ideologies during this period. For instance, Turkish Islamists such as Sezai Karakoç, Ali Bulaç and İsmet Özel constructed a rejectionist approach. Truly, İsmet Özel's *Three Problems* rejected alienation, technology and civilization, and sought to legitimize this position with references to Islam. Bulaç's *Contemporary Concepts and Orders* broke with Marxism, capitalism and secularism to produce a symbolic Islamic alternative by talking about "an Islamist approach against the contemporary world and its orders." According to him, fascism, capitalism and communism were collectively Western and undivine orders. Islam, in contrast, was divine.<sup>5</sup>

The main focus for Islamists in this period was on politics and "establishing a state." While the movement formulated Islamic-inspired responses to various contemporary ideologies, it simultaneously interacted with these ideologies and increasingly resembled them. At the same time, the experience of extreme secularization and modernization excluded Islam from social life as the faith became deprived of its means of political representation and participation. Consequently, Islamism served as a platform upon which political and ideological demands could be formulated in response to this campaign of exclusion. Necip Fazıl's

*Pattern of Ideology* remains one of the most authoritative texts in this area.<sup>6</sup>

Undergoing considerable change as a result of globalization and the emergence of alternate modernities, Islamism, particularly in Turkey, is currently in a process of shifting its 'state problem' from saving/establishing the state to transforming it. In this context, the movements now engage in social and intellectual pursuits. In relation to these novel social conditions, Islamist political demands tend to use new rhetoric.

### **From Plural Modernities to Plural Islamisms**

Some observers have interpreted Islamism's gradual incorporation of plural dimensions as the emergence of post-Islamism:



Not only a condition, post-Islamism is also a project, a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains. Yet, post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular. Post-Islamism represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity with rights, faith and freedoms, Islam and civil liberties and focuses on rights instead of duties, plurality instead of singular authority, historicity rather than fixed and rigid interpretation of scriptures, and the future rather than the past.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of post-Islamism is a rather important attempt to explain how increasingly commonplace postmodern social relations and new values, debates, structures and approaches have begun to transform Islamist movements. As such, it hints at Islamism's new inclinations and demonstrates that Islamism, too, has been reproduced under postmodern social conditions and differs from its previous tenets.<sup>8</sup>

In truth, Islamism has demonstrated some plurality in both its historicity and normativity, as a number of thinkers, themes, publications, movements, groups and countries have demonstrated over its 200-year history. This quality is the force behind Islamism's plurality. In countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, various organizations, including Ennahda, Muslim Brotherhood, National Outlook, Ad

Dawa, Hamas and Wahhabism, represent this aspect of Islamism. Its relations with mainstream theological currents such as Sunni, Shi'a and Wahhabi identities also echo this plurality. Again, the movement's many reformist and radical manifestations engender variety.

The sociological aspects of Islamism's recent pluralization are of utmost importance. This period of plural modernities has entailed a pluralization of society. The increasing variations within civil society, the reproduction of public sphere through different means of representation, and the manifestation of identity-based demands via multicultural "identity politics" refer to the emergence of a new social presence. Islamism, too, assumes different guises in

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this novel-plural universe. New social forces such as refugees, immigrants, hybrid identities, multicultural spaces and ethnic representation campaigns have been empowered by the increase in cross-societal permeability. Globalization's fluid social universe has eroded static, individual communities and currents with clear-cut boundaries and single-issue interests. Islamism, which is also located within this social and political context, has undergone simultaneous processes of dissolution, redefinition and restructuring. Consequently, we are

on the eve of a new period in which it is more appropriate to talk about new strands of Islamism as opposed to the “end of history” for the movement.

Thanks to the networks, risks, pluralities and representations engendered by global social relations Islamism moved away from a singular ideology and began to transform itself into a plural form. At this particular historical junction, the abandoning of political revolution with the rise of democracy, the spread of free markets and the re-

ing issues through ideology and putting social utopias to work was left behind at the end of the Cold War. Instead, these movements have prioritized certain civil society functions such as education, women’s rights, anti-poverty campaigns and pressure politics, all of which have become possible with the emergence of plural modernities. This, in turn, has motivated them to consider reformist demands at the expense of utopia and revolution. Particularly in the Turkish case, the Islamist movement underwent

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discovery of both groups and the individual due to collectivism’s demise has had major impacts on Islamism. As a matter of fact, this was marked by an intense debate among Turkey’s Islamists on civil society, democracy and the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> In this period, new themes such as Islamic civilizations and values and the uniqueness of the Muslim community have replaced discussions on—and pursuit of—an Islamic state.<sup>10</sup>

All revolutionary and utopian currents of thoughts of the single-modernity period underwent changes due to globalization’s influences in the social realm and they have all moved away from their aforementioned principles. The notion that they could solve press-

this process rather intensely.

From this perspective, Turkey’s transition to a pluralistic society as a result of globalization, its introduction to the market economy and its move toward democracy has entailed major consequences for Islamism. In this context,

Islamists have increasingly striven to develop ways to reconcile their political yearnings with democracy.

As a matter of fact, some Islamists who had viewed democracy as blasphemy in the 1990s have begun to regard it as a “lesser evil” in the past decade.<sup>11</sup> This change in political perceptions has had considerable consequences. First of all, democracy—a normative political regime that the Kemalists envisaged and defined as “the people’s will against that of God”—was reinvented as a liberal order. The AK Party’s practices during its time in power in Turkey have provided sufficient evidence in this regard. This, in turn, has altered the Islamists’ political perceptions as the idea of a pluralist



democracy that has made its peace with Islam and allows its representation has come to be viewed favorably. The notion that Islam's relationship with the state may be based on non-ideological foundations and pluralist democracy has received increasing support in this period.

As a reflection of the political and social transformations underway in Turkey, some Islamist intellectuals have situated the relationship between Islam and democracy in a positive context in order to develop a Muslim political identity based on a liberal-democratic perspective.<sup>12</sup> Through the idea of a Muslim democratic identity, they have underscored Islam's pro-liberty political position that acknowledges individual rights and links itself to a universal set of democratic relations. This puts Islam outside authoritarian and repressive regimes and emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with a democratic political authority, equality and representation.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, as Islam's public visibility has increased and its participation in politics was made possible through democratic channels, the Islamists too have changed and moved away from their previous revolutionary utopias. Nilüfer Göle refers to this transformation as "regularization" and Islamism's "second wave." Göle describes this condition as follows:

In Islamism's second wave, Islamic actors mix with modern urban spaces, employ communications networks, engage in public debate, follow consumption trends, learn about market rules, step into a secular time, encounter new

values such as individualism, professionalism and consumerism, and think about these new practices of theirs.<sup>14</sup>

In the Turkish case, Islamist movements are gradually evolving into new structures that can develop civil society functions and further their political demands by integrating into the democratic order. In this period, lifestyle-related debates tend to become more influential in the public arena. As a matter of fact, the recently held abortion debate in the country may be interpreted as an attempt to represent an Islamic lifestyle in the public arena.

Turkish Islamism's moving away from its goal of establishing a polity, its gradual liberalization and its attempts to more visibly participate in civil society point to a large transformation. The emergence of a variety of initiatives, platforms and institutions such as women's associations, charitable foundations, local and professional associations, websites, Islamic fashion magazines, and television and radio channels collectively represent the Islamists' engagement in daily life at the expense of their political and social demands.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the AK Party has played an important role in this transformation by distancing itself from the Islamist movement's revolutionary, utopian elements as well as the theory of Islamic statehood. According to one observer, the AK Party was instrumental in the Islamists' transformation.<sup>16</sup> In truth, it would be more correct to say that the AK Party's democratization efforts

have helped reform the Islamists and motivated them to redefine and represent themselves.

Both in Turkey and many Middle Eastern countries, Islamic movements have begun to learn about and relate

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to democratic government, plurality of identities, and the civil society perspective under globalization. In this sense, the Islamists are currently in the process of altering their previous political positions, which were developed to counter repressive ideologies, such as Kemalism, Ba'athism and Nasserism, and their societal visions.<sup>17</sup> Islamists that have altered their political position have greater access to legitimacy, representation and political power. The AK Party's coming to power in Turkey led other Islamist movements in the region to become more optimistic. In Tunisia, En-Nahda has had the same success thanks to the Arab Spring. Egypt, too, continues to follow this trend with the Muslim Brotherhood.

There is another significant stream of thought in Islamism, such as in al-Qaeda or Hezbollah, that rejects democracy, endorses an anti-imperialist discourse, and adopts the methods of resorting to violence and repression. These Islamist movements have come to resemble the

Cold War-era rulers against whom they struggled and they have not changed their structures and continue with representations that reflect the static Cold War-era regimes and societies. Of course, it cannot be denied that those who seek to speak the language of conflict and war in the conflict-ridden geography of the Middle East and the Islamic world have adopted Islam as the language of choice in their quest for mass appeal. Movements

such as the Taliban that altogether reject international and global processes and equate democracy and rule of law with imperialism fall within this category.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, trying to gain representation through violence and conflict paradoxically echoes Islamism's seeking of representation through democracy and human rights. This situation begs us to remember that throughout history, religions have manifested conflict as much as peace. Therefore, Islam's particular meaning and practices within the broader context of societies, groups and ages have utmost importance. Islamism, too, stands for a state of religiosity that has been guised in a variety of ways throughout its 200-year history. It survives in the globalizing world's new societies by re-imagining itself in the form of identity, politics and discourse.

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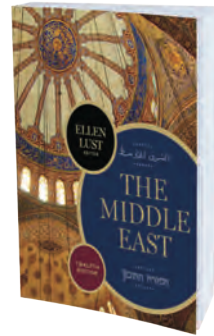
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