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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Contemporary Turkey in Conflict: Ethnicity, Islam and Politics

Tahir Abbas

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 216 pp., £24.99 (Paperback)

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Since the rise of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, the country has been at the forefront of events in the region and beyond, even more so in the wake of the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt. The party's initial pro-EU, pro-democratic posture has given way to an illiberal authoritarianism since 2010, a process that has yet to reach its denouement. Tahir Abbas' worthy ambition in *Contemporary Turkey in Conflict: Ethnicity, Islam and Politics* is to chart the path of sociopolitical transformation Turkey has undergone over the last decade or so, by surveying some of the key ideas and actors shaping contemporary Turkish politics. The author, in six well sourced and written chapters, grounds his survey in a comprehensive range of important themes—namely: the issue of minorities (with emphasis on Armenians and Kurds); the broader Kurdish Issue; contemporary Kemalism; Islam; neo-liberalism and conservatism; and nationalism and ethnicity.

Chapter 1 ("Setting the Scene") sets the scene with an excellent summary presentation of the core contemporary challenges facing Turkey that focuses on ethnic and political conflicts (20). The chapter provides the reader with much useful and up-to-date information on the Kurds and the Gülen movement (GM)—the ruling AKP's erstwhile allies—to which the author devotes several pages, which are both richly descriptive and informative. Perhaps unsurprisingly—given the opacity of the movement and the fact that the "PR war" between it and the Turkish state continues to muddy the waters between "fact" and "fiction"—the author presents the reader with a survey that itself appears puzzling and contradictory. For example, the author correctly notes that the GM is "*de jure* apolitical but *de facto* [has] political impacts" (10). Yet, he forecloses the political nature of the network by asserting that the *abiler* (elder brothers)—the key individuals charged with implementing the political directives of the movement's central decision-makers—"exist entirely for the purpose of supporting the needs of [the younger] men [in their charge]" (14). In other parts of the book, the movement, or Hizmet—the GM's own preferred term and the one the author himself chooses to adopt—is presented as both plural and open *and* highly purposive; namely, "as a central bridge between enlightenment of an Islamic nature and secularism of a political and economic character" (144). This reviewer, at least, finds these statements rather contradictory and deeply problematic. Even if both claims can be reconciled, they present an (at best) incomplete picture, foregrounding the movement's (now utterly discredited) self-promotion

as an organ of “faith-based service” while simultaneously overlooking the culpability of key movement institutions and individuals in fomenting Turkey’s current political strife.

Chapter 2 (“Historicising Pluralism and Monoculturalism”) provides a historical survey of how religious plurality and mono-culturalism has been realized from the Ottoman era to the present “postmodern” (the author’s term) Turkey (20). The author raises some important issues here, one being the predicament the Kurds have found themselves in since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and another the long, drawn out conflict between Kemalist and Islamist circles. On this point, the author makes a point of acknowledging the conventional trap of reducing Turkish politics to the bipolar scheme of Kemalism *vs.* Islamism, noting in particular the role played by neo-liberalism as a central ideological driver. Yet, once again, the reader is left puzzled when the text itself appears to fall into the very trap the author has rightly cautioned against. It is this reviewer’s opinion that bipolar schemes are no longer capable (if they ever were) of providing any clear insight into complex political transformations like the one in which Turkey currently finds itself. As one scholar has argued, “while not denying the importance of dichotomies as embedded elements in modernization paradigm, [binaries unavoidably [leave\] out the possibility for an analysis that considers social totality”](#). Indeed, Abbas would have done well to extend his own assertion that neo-liberalism constitutes the core theoretical framework for making sense of the current Turkish malaise to its logical conclusion. To that end, further contextualization and elaboration of grounding terms, such as “progressive neo-liberal Islam” (133) and “democratic neo-liberal society”, would have been most welcome. Indeed, one must ask how the modifiers “democratic” and “progressive” that he has chosen make sense in an analysis that acknowledges Turkey’s current order as one built “for the few”, which seeks to [restore and increase of the power, income, and wealth of the upper classes](#).

Chapter 3 (“Insights on Intolerance Towards Minorities”) deals with minority groups: Armenians (50) as well as Alevis and Kurds (52). Abbas adopts a thesis of Turkish “exceptionalism”, which to him is a product of Islam’s paradoxical relations with ethnicity and nationalism. “The historical and political formation of the Turkish nation”, he asserts, “is rather different than western European conceptualizations”. [And] as such, “the complex ethnic and racial tensions that exist in Turkey remain less well understood” (55). But is the Turkish experience really so distinctive? What, then, are we to make of the comparable patterns we observe in other parts of the world with similar complex religious-nationalist divides, such as the Irish, the Basque and the Kashmiri conflicts? A comparative approach that included these cases—which provide striking similarities without being identical to Turkey—could in fact provide welcome insight into Turkey’s own long-standing conflicts and cleavages and, more to the point, offer helpful evidence for the otherwise unsupported claim of Turkish exceptionalism. To be sure, as another reviewer has aptly put it, “the author’s claims about ‘[Turkish exceptionalism](#)’ will fail to convince readers”.

The following chapter (“Perspectives on the ‘Kurdish Issue’”) focuses on the Kurdish issue, which gained an increased impetus from the 1970s with the emergence of the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan (PKK). During ethnographic fieldwork in the town of Yüksekova in January 2013, Abbas conducted in-depth interviews with families with at least one—and in some cases many—family members in the PKK. This fascinating chapter provides important and insightful observations on “how Kurdish groups in the town understood the conflict,

experienced the realities of the harsh treatment they faced, explained how their young children were persuaded to join the PKK, and how they coped as families locked in a deadly conflict zone” (22). It is undoubtedly one of the most informative chapters in the book. Methodologically speaking, however, Abbas’ observations offer no scope for generalization, with only a handful of interviews conducted—six in total, as presented in one table (74). While these offer a fascinating, extended and rich picture of the impact of PKK recruitment in Yüksekova, the reader is left with no sense of how the discussion connects with broader aspects of the Kurdish Issue writ large, or indeed to what extent—if any—the author’s observations apply in other Kurdish populated parts of Turkey. No doubt, further ethnographic fieldwork by the author in other regions would allow him and the reader to form far more complete answers to the questions he has rightly posed. Regardless, the chapter offers invaluable information on aspects of PKK recruitment, as well as insight on how the Turkish state has prosecuted its war in the region, in this case use of sarin gas by the Turkish Armed Forces (94). While, most regrettably, Abbas provides no reference to support his claim of sarin use, a simple [online](#) search shows he is on the mark. Providing such evidentiary support is all the more important given how commonly this chemical warfare is overlooked in the western news media and even denied outright by [commentators](#).

Chapter 5 (“The Gezi Park Awakening”) focuses on the widespread resistance wave throughout Turkey in the wake of the Gezi Park protests in May 2013. Apart from the author’s observations on the spot—an invaluable contribution to our knowledge on the topic—the chapter also benefits from a series of interviews with respondents in and around the protests. These help the reader to understand the diversity and similarity of opinion held by different interest groups participating in the Gezi protests, i.e. Kemalists, pro-Kurdish groups, football fans, LGBT groups, etc., most—if not all—of which stood united against the hegemonic neo-liberal agenda of the ruling AKP.

The final chapter of the book (“Exploring Trust in Society and Politics”) questions how different configurations of social capital affect political trust and how patterns diverge according to ethnicity, class and religiosity in contemporary Turkey. In that respect, the chapter scrutinizes, unavoidably perhaps, the country’s Europeanisation process and provides much useful information. Methodologically, the chapter draws its main data from a combined sample of 4,272 Turkish respondents to the 2004 and 2008 waves of the European Social Survey (120). It concludes that the ESS data suggests that the specific social outcomes are in the expected direction (137).

Contemporary Turkey in Conflict is an eloquently written and comprehensively sourced study on the sociopolitical transformation of Turkey over the past decade. While several of the threads the author draws out are left rather hanging, there is [no] doubt that the themes Abbas identifies and picks apart through close interdisciplinary analysis are the core issues Turkey is facing. His contextualization of the issues, as well as the in-depth information he provides across the chapters, help the reader grasp the very essence of many of Turkey’s problems in this period of transition. All criticism aside, the book is not only a welcome addition to the booming literature on Turkey (and the AKP regime in particular), but also provides new insight into old issues, while raising new questions that will, undoubtedly, open new avenues for research.