

Book Reviews

Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks by Jenny White, Princeton University Press, 2012.

Mehraj ud din Bhat

Turkey is considered as one of the most resplendent countries in the contemporary Muslim world. It has once again shown its worth in the international arena as an economic and political powerhouse under its elected Muslim government, and is looked on by many as a model for other Muslim countries in the wake of the Arab spring. This book is one among the important contributions which reveals how Turkish national identity and the meanings of Islam and secularism have undergone radical change in today's Turkey, and asks whether the Turkish model should be viewed as a success story or cautionary tale. Jenny White shows how Turkey's Muslim elites have mounted a powerful political and economic challenge to the country's secularists, developing an alternative definition of the nation based on a nostalgic revival of Turkey's Ottoman past. These Muslim nationalists have pushed aside the Republican ideal of a nation defined by purity of blood, language, and culture. They see no contradiction in pious Muslims running a secular state, and increasingly express their Muslim identity through participation in economic networks and a lifestyle of Islamic fashion and leisure. For many younger Turks, religious and national identities, like commodities, have become objects of choice and forms of personal expression.

The first chapter of the book is an introductory outline of the experiences author during her stay in Turkey. She highlights the ongoing tussle between Kemalists and newly emerging practicing Muslim youth with nationalist tendencies. The author also discusses the period known in Turkish history as "The third republic" as a fierce battle between secularists and Muslim sectors of the population. She deliberates into the introducing her wishes to discuss certain discursive patterns that emerged from her conversations.

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She defines in her book as “Muslim” those who respond to her questions about their identity (*kimlik*) by volunteering Muslim before Turk, and “secularists” as those who made a point of placing a Muslim identity second to Turkishness. (p 21)

In Chapter 2, “Islam and the nation”, the author has discussed the evolution and transactions of Turkey’s three republican era’s in the course of Turkish history and how they were preceded by coups. She also takes a look at the relation between Islam and the nation in Turkish history. The author particularly tries to focus on social and political developments since the 1980s— the rise and decline of Islamism as a political movement, its replacement by a new generation of Muslim democrats and pious modernists, and the development of what the author calls ‘Muslim nationalism’. These are discussed in part as outcomes of macro political factors, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the EU’s lukewarm response to Turkey’s membership bid, but also within the context of Turkish national culture.

Chapter 3 deconstructs the edifice of language of Kemalist ultranationalists who are the supporters of a strong state and military and a national scenario based on a pan-Turkish identity and bloodline. This topic entails discussion of schoolbooks, rituals, and military service which act as criteria of validity, and structure reception of particular “truths.” Media, advertisements, cinema, popular culture, and word of mouth also play a role, and are discussed here and in the following chapters.

Chapter 4, “The missionary and the headscarf”, examines two key emblems of fear—the missionary and the headscarf—because the threat they present is not as clear-cut as a PKK assault on an army camp but, rather, involve out-of-focus images of Turkey’s becoming Iran or Malaysia—each an extreme inversion of the other. The author discusses the headscarf as another meta-category of threat that divides Turks, this time along lines of piety and secularity, but also over what it means to be Turkish. It also delineates the effects of missionary activities in the Turkish state and how it is gradually converting the different sections of Turkey into Christianity.

Chapter 5, “No mixing”, discusses the role of boundaries and purity in reproducing Turkish identity. The author begins with conceptions of “the enemy” and the often violent attempts to “unmix” the population. Fears of boundary penetration and loss of the nation are kept at bay through purity rituals and taboos. She examines objects that are perceived to be “out of place” (like the headscarf), the purification of space through placement of images, rehearsal of in-group/out-group membership in festivals, food preferences, and notions of the purity of blood, custom, language, religion, and music. She also takes into board entanglement and hybrid (*melez*) forms within society and the expression of these forms within national identity (*ies*) and

political ideology. Liberalism, for instance, can be considered an ideological form of hybridity that, by its very nature of accepting boundary crossing, engages the defenses of the militarist nation.

Chapter 6, “Sex and the nation”, discusses the unending efforts to maintain continuity and purity, an attribute of both the nation and the women, and the effect of such practices on women’s relation to the nation. The author also takes up the gendered aspect of nationalism and the nation. The discourse of nationalism uses the same language and imagery as that of sexual purity or honor, that is, the shame brought about by penetration of sexual boundaries. The effect of such discourses, she suggests, is that men and women position themselves differently in the national imagery.

In Chapter 7, “Choice and community”, the author discuss the dual and contradictory nature of Turkish social and political life as it accommodates individual choice and motivations while validating the primacy of family and community in determining ethics and norms. The collision of individual liberties with the collective logic of Turkish society is played out on a national scale in the contradictory policies and practices of Muslim nationalists and Kemalist secularists. The final chapter examines the concept of Muslim nationalism in relation to the interplay of religion and nationalism in other countries. For instance, Turkey has been widely touted as a model for Arab countries building democratic systems after the Arab Spring. What lessons can be drawn from this analysis of Muslim nationalism about the future course of the Arab Spring?

This book is one of the important contributions for understanding the different ongoing trends in Turkey. Jenny White discusses the dilly dallying duality of approaches of Muslim nationalists supporting globalization and political liberalism, while on the other hand remained adamant to authoritarianism and intolerance. It is quite evident that the author has given much importance and precedence to Muslim nationalists who emerged after 1980 in her work. Intrinsicly, this book discusses the different trends of thought from Muslim nationalism rooted in Islamic religion to Kemalism of Ataturk’s liberal-secular ideology, from identity crisis to EU’s recognition of Turkey. She believes that Turkishness is as much a product of the media and market as of the educational system. For instance, post-Ottomanism or Ottomania, as some call it, has now infected all sectors of society, pious and secular alike.

Nevertheless, this is a well written, engaging, and smart book about the ongoing trends and movements of contemporary Turkey which will be widely useful for the students and scholars belonging to the field of Islamic Studies and West Asian Studies. This book will help to unknot the different confusions and ideologies of Turkish nation in contemporary academic paradigm.