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THE BREAKING UP OF TURKEY'S ISLAMIC ALLIANCE: THE AKP-GULEN CONFLICT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

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Turkey's Islamic movement increased its power dramatically during the first decade of the 2000s, benefiting from the cooperation of the AKP and the Gulen movement. This alliance allowed Islamic actors to control major state functions following several decades of struggle against secularist elites. Yet, to the surprise of most observers, the alliance began to fall apart in 2011 and quickly evolved into a fierce battle between the AKP government and the Gulenists. Demonstrating how Islamic ties were cross-cut by political cleavages, the Turkish case challenged dominant approaches which overemphasized religious identities in explaining the behavior of Islamic actors.

*Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time.
--William Shakespeare*

Throughout the past decade, students of Middle East politics and particularly specialists on Islamist¹ movements have paid close attention to the case of Turkey. After decades of secularist rule that dominated Turkish politics and that was constantly challenged by Islamist parties and civil society organizations, political power was finally transferred to the neo-Islamist AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or Justice and Development Party (JDP)) in 2002.² Following its dramatic electoral victory, the AKP captured government control and consolidated its power further in the succeeding years. While secularist institutions and opponents were gradually subdued, the AKP continued to win succeeding elections and formed all one-party governments. On the other hand, the success of Islamist political actors in Turkey also empowered Islamic civil society organizations, such as the Gulen movement, particularly during the first two terms of the AKP government.

The Gulen movement had been Turkey's largest Islamic network, enjoyed major support at grassroots level, and controlled a significant amount of financial resources, but

it was treated with suspicion by former secularist elites. This distrustful attitude changed during the AKP rule, which honored the Gulen movement and opened up new opportunities for its supporters. In other words, a "grand alliance" was formed, turning the first decade of the 2000s into a golden age for Turkey's Islamic actors.

Yet, to the surprise of most observers, the alliance between the AKP and the Gulen movement began to fall apart in 2011; it dramatically collapsed in 2013 and finally evolved into an intense fight in the subsequent years. As both sides attacked each other using the control they had gained over particular state functions in the preceding years, the dispute also brought different components of the Turkish state apparatus against each other. While the Gulenists confronted the AKP through their connections in the bureaucracy, the AKP used its control over the executive and legislative branches to combat the Gulenists, and it seems to have neutralized the Gulenists so far.

The dramatic disintegration of Turkey's Islamic group carries important lessons for Middle East studies, particularly with regard

to the explanatory power of religious identity. The Turkish case strongly challenges dominant “culturalist” approaches that overemphasize Islam. Instead, it highlights the relevance of “political” variables.

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES AND ISLAM AS A “RESIDUAL VARIABLE”

Studies of Middle East politics have long been dominated by culturalist approaches. These perspectives have particularly focused on Islam, considering it as the most dominant variable to shape various aspects of social, political, and economic life in the Middle East.³ According to these approaches, Islam explains a number of phenomena observed in the Muslim world, from the persistence of authoritarianism to the lack of democratic movements, patriarchy, and limits of capitalist development.

Culturalist approaches have received criticism from rival perspectives, including institutionalist and economic approaches. These critics have suggested that the role of Islam has been overemphasized in popular analyses of the Middle East.⁴ They problematize the fact that most scholars use Islam too frequently as a “residual variable” to explain any phenomena that they cannot throw light upon through conventional means of analysis.⁵ This fallacy of “Middle East exceptionalism” portrays the Middle East as “atheoretical,” “too complicated,” or “too unique” to analyze through general social science theories.⁶ Yet, as the critics highlight, neither is the Middle East unique because of Islam, nor does Islam have an omnipotent influence on social life in the Middle East. However, despite the theoretical strength of these critical views, they had been unable to substantially refute culturalist claims due to the absence of sufficient empirical evidence. The persistence of authoritarianism, the weakness of civil society, and the popularity of Islamism as the main identity that has mobilized people has supported culturalists’ depictions of the Middle East as a unique piece of territory, shaped by Islam.

Nevertheless, the evidence has finally presented itself. Beginning in 2011, opposition movements began to emerge across the Muslim world one after another—from Tunisia and Egypt, to Bahrain and Yemen, and finally Turkey. As most observers have noted, a main implication of these uprisings is that they challenged previous assumptions concerning the lack of public demand for political opening in Muslim societies.⁷ There is, however, another aspect of these recent developments that has not received the attention it deserved. The mobilization of these opposition movements went hand in hand with historical splits within Islamist movements in some cases, most dramatically in the case of Turkey, while they included coalitions between Islamist and secular parties in others, such as in Tunisia and Egypt. Thus, they strongly challenged the assumption that Islamic ties were stronger than others in Middle Eastern societies. This review concentrates on the Turkish example, which is particularly illustrative in this regard. As considered below, the Turkish case most dramatically demonstrates the breaking up of an Islamist alliance during its peak, due to political cleavages that cut across Islamic connections.

SUCCESS, RIVALRY, AND AN “UGLY DIVORCE”

The Gulen movement is Turkey’s largest and strongest Islamic movement. It enjoys a transnational web of supporters that include a wide range of occupations including bank owners, businessmen, media owners, police officers, and bureaucrats. The movement follows the teachings and leadership of Fetullah Gulen, a retired preacher. Gulen has been in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since he left Turkey in 1999, facing charges of engaging in anti-secular activities against the secularist state establishment. The movement has been expanding its grassroots support consistently since the 1990s. It has been mobilizing mainly through its network in the education system, developed by opening hundreds of private schools, dorms, and study centers (*dersane*) in Turkey and elsewhere.

Despite its Islamic identity, Gulenists have avoided an open confrontation with the secularist establishment and have kept a low profile until 2011. Claiming to represent “civil Islam,” Gulenists have carefully maintained their distance from active politics and political parties.⁸ On the other hand, they have indirectly expanded their influence to various state institutions through their supporters in the government bureaucracy, judiciary, police, and even the military, which had been one of the pillars of Turkish secularism. Yet the Gulenists' guard against active politics was lifted with the rise of the neo-Islamist AKP in 2002, which dramatically changed the fate of the movement in an unexpected way.

The AKP represented a new approach in the tradition of political Islam in Turkey. In contrast to its ideologically more radical predecessors, the founders of the AKP, including Erdogan and his colleagues, embraced a more moderate version of Islam. Unlike its incarnations, Erdogan's AKP avoided direct confrontation with secularist institutions, claimed to have changed, and described the AKP as a representative of conservative democrats, rather than Islamists. Combining a neoliberal economic agenda with a conservative outlook, the AKP quickly mobilized a large number of supporters. Only one year after it was founded, it came to power in 2002, obtaining more than 30 percent of the votes. Yet this dramatic electoral victory of the AKP and its ability to form a single party government was only a beginning in the party's march to power. Its secularist rivals in the judiciary, military, and various parts of the state bureaucracy continued to challenge the AKP. Thus, to consolidate its power, the AKP had to combat its rivals, uproot them from their positions, and expand its control to the bureaucracy as well as other state functions beyond the executive branch. This made the cooperation of their friends in the Gulen movement significant and brought them closer to each other.

The Gulen movement's support was important for the AKP, not only to widen its popularity but also to consolidate its control over political institutions. Aligning with the

Gulen movement, which had managed to develop inroads to the state bureaucracy since the 1990s, and particularly during the 2000s, allowed the AKP to combat its opponents in the rival institutions and solidify its power. A main product of this relation was to curb the political influence of the military, which had been a threat to Islamic parties since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. For the Gulen movement, aligning with the AKP was desirable too, because it allowed the movement to obtain political influence in a more directly and effortlessly than before. Most importantly, after all the years of having to keep a low profile and suffering from the suspicious attitudes of the political elite, now the movement enjoyed the restoration of its honor through the glorification of the AKP elite. The coming together of these two major powers thus appeared to be a match made in heaven and marked the beginning of a golden age for Turkey's Islamic actors. Nevertheless, it did not last too long. As the famous saying goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt.”

Problems leading up to the breakup between the two Islamic groups became apparent in 2011 and were followed by an “ugly divorce,” as Kadri Gursel describes it, which soon evolved into one of the fiercest political battles in the history of Turkish politics.⁹ While the true reasons behind the AKP-Gulen split are difficult to assess from the outside, some turning points in the process shed light on the transformation of their relationship.

The first signs of conflict between the AKP and the Gulenists erupted in September 2011, following the leaked recording of a secret meeting in Oslo between the head of the National Intelligence Organization, Hakan Fidan, and PKK representatives, the armed Kurdish organization that had been fighting Turkish security forces since the 1980s. In the context of Turkish politics, it was highly controversial for a state officer to hold an official meeting with PKK representatives, which was considered as a terrorist organization. When opposition groups began to criticize Fidan and the government's opaque policy towards the Kurdish opposition,

Gülenist intellectuals started to raise their voices as well. This was a turning point, as it was the first time that the Gülenists had taken a critical position toward the AKP government since it had come to power in 2002.

Six months later, in February 2012, the Ankara Prosecutors' Office called in Fidan for an interrogation about the National Intelligence Organization's links to the PKK. This was a major event, as it reflected the presence of rival groups within the state apparatus and demonstrated the limits of the government's power. Perceiving the prosecutors' act as a challenge to itself, the government was quick to respond. Prime Minister Erdogan defended Fidan, explained that he had sent him to Oslo himself, and then pushed for a speedy legislation change that would immunize Fidan from investigations. Condemning the Prosecutors' Office, he claimed that there were signs of a "parallel state" operating illegitimately under the control of non-elected actors. It was not immediately clear to all who these actors were, but it was not long before Fetullah Gülen was named as the leader of this shadow organization.

The leaking of the Oslo meeting also signaled a new phase in Turkey's policies regarding the Kurds. The AKP government was now declaring the beginning of a "peace process," which included some compromises with the Kurdish side. While the process was embraced by various social groups--with the exception of nationalist parties-- concerns were raised as well, including by Gülenist intellectuals. Yet the criticism was limited and the peace process continued to receive the support of not only pro-Kurdish groups but also of liberal actors. The popularity of the peace process among these groups allowed the AKP to avoid substantial opposition for a time, while its counterparts in other Middle Eastern countries were facing major uprisings.

Yet the wave of opposition that started in the region, typically referred to as the Arab Spring, finally hit Turkey around June 2013. An environmental protest by a group of young individuals quickly turned into an opposition movement against the increasingly centralized

rule of the government. Following the harsh reaction they received from the police and the government, the protests escalated and spread throughout the nation. The Gülenists reacted carefully to the protest movements. To some of them, this was not "their fight" and not worth risking the further straining of relations with the government. On the other hand, however, they also did not want to be on the wrong side of history. Thus, they attempted to maintain a neutral position. Eventually, the AKP quashed the movement but the genie was out of the bottle and the spirit of opposition was now in the air. In the context of a rapidly polarizing environment, neutrality indicated opposition and the Gülen movement began to move--perhaps involuntarily--in that direction, at least in the eyes of the government.

Failed revolutions are often followed by further centralization of governments and a decline of rights and liberties. Indeed, the AKP's reaction to the Gezi movement was a more aggressive effort to tighten its grip on power and combat its opponents. For the AKP government, the Gülen movement was at the top of this list. This conviction pushed the AKP government to pursue a major attack on the Gülen movement. In November 2013, the government announced its new education policy, which included the shutting down of all study centers that prepare students for university entrance exams. This was a huge shock and terrible news for the Gülen movement, whose study centers had been critical for mobilization of new supporters since the 1990s. Shutting down the study centers translated as a direct and vicious attack on the Gülen movement. Thus, this decision constituted a major turning point and permanently changed relations between the Gülen movement and the AKP. Softliners both from the government and the Gülen movement tried to control the crisis. Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, for example, expressed appreciation for the role the study centers had played in the Turkish education system over the years and stressed that the policy did not target the Gülen movement, which he respected.¹⁰ He also suggested that the new policy was only intended to transform

rather than eradicate the study centers. Similarly, Gulenists closer to the government, such as Huseyin Gulerce, tried to calm their comrades by reminding them of the (Islamic) ties between the two groups which were too precious to sever.¹¹ Yet the hardliners dominated the moderates, study centers were shut down, and the tensions began to escalate.

The conflict finally reached its peak in February 2013, three months before the elections, following a criminal investigation with corruption allegations involving major government actors. Simultaneously, secret tape recordings were released from anonymous accounts, which included phone conversations alleged to be between government officials--including the prime minister, their family members, and businessmen--revealing illicit actions and corruption. Without a doubt, this was a huge shock to the government, as well as to their opponents. After the immediate shock subsided, however, the AKP decided to fight back. Government officials claimed that the tapes were fake.

The investigations and the tapes reflected the existence of a major conspiracy against the government. To the surprise of its opponents, who thought the government could never survive the scandal, the government handled the crisis. The May 2013 elections were a vote of confidence for the AKP government. The AKP maintained its electoral majority, regained its confidence. The AKP began to fight back. According to the government, the members of the Gulen movement were behind this conspiracy. They claimed that the Gulenists controlled a shadow organization within the police and the judiciary and that it was the government's priority to cleanse the state bureaucracy from this group.

Hundreds of people, including policemen, prosecutors, and judges, were removed from their positions or jailed. Former Chief Prosecutor Zekeriya Oz, who led the corruption investigation, fled the country in August 2015 just hours before the issue of arrest warrants, facing charges of attempting to overthrow the government forcefully and forming a criminal organization. Eventually,

the corruption cases were dropped by the new prosecutors who replaced Oz and others who had been working on the investigation. It was ironic that in 2008, Oz had led the prosecution of the high-profile Ergenekon trial against an alleged secularist clandestine organization, including secularist military generals, journalists, and lawyers, who ended up being arrested on the same charges. Now, with Oz losing his legitimacy in the eyes of the government, the parliament passed new legislation to allow the release of the majority of those arrested, reflecting their change of heart about Oz's judgement.

Bureaucratic cleansing efforts were followed by attacks on business and media owners affiliated with the Gulen movement. In December 2014, the police raided Samanyolu TV, the main Gulenist TV channel, and arrested Editor-in-Chief Ekrem Dumanli and General Manager Hidayet Karaca. The two were charged with "establishing and administrating an armed organization." While Dumanli was released, Karaca went to jail. Then, in October 2014, the government went after Gulen-affiliated financial institutions, such as Bank Asya. In addition to pressing charges against the bank for unpaid taxes and allegations of failure to fulfill requirements of transparency, the government authorities also encouraged business owners connected to the state to withdraw their money from Bank Asya. Finally, in May 2015, a few weeks before the parliamentary elections, the bank was seized by the Turkish state fund (TMSF) and was appointed a new trustee. This was followed by similar moves against major companies whose owners were known to be affiliated with the Gulen network, including Akin Ipek's Koza Holding. In October 2015, less than a month before the snap elections, the Criminal Court of Peace appointed a new trustee to Koza Holding and all of its subsidiaries, including gold mines and media channels, such as Bugun and Kanalturk. The seizure of Bugun and Kanalturk caused great controversy among opposition groups who considered this as an effort to mute their voices during the election campaign.

The victory of the AKP government in the November 2015 snap elections suggests that the government has been successful in quashing the opposition movement it had been in confrontation with since 2013. The Gulen movement seems to have gone low profile, along with the secularist opposition. While the armed conflict with the PKK is peaking again, in the realm of mainstream politics, the AKP seems to have solidified itself. Still, some things have changed permanently in Turkish politics. The perceptions concerning Islamism and Islamic actors have shifted for both Islamists and their opponents and made them reconsider their assumptions. They have all seen that Islamic ties are not omnipotent and can be crosscut by other cleavages. Islamic identities are important but they are not necessarily above others.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE AKP-GULEN CONFLICT

The main lesson to learn from the battle between the AKP and the Gulen movement for students of Middle East politics is that political cleavages can cut across religious ones, even in the Muslim world. Islamic ties can be strong but so can others. Thus, coalitions that include Islamic actors can be formed around mutual political and economic interests and they can be broken in their absence. Islamic actors do not constitute exceptions to these general rules.

Further, the transformation in relations between Turkey's main Islamic actors may be a sign of positive change despite the turmoil it has caused. Influential Turkish sociologists such as Serif Mardin have argued that Turkey, as other remnants of the Ottoman Empire, lacked the cross-cutting cleavages that shaped European societies and contributed to their social development.¹² In Turkey and other parts of the Middle East, cleavages were segmental and overlapping, and therefore they were reinforced. Here, religious identities typically became proxies of the many other layers of social, economic, and political gaps with which they overlapped. This prevented the formation of multiple coalitions and

enhanced polarization. In contrast, as some seminal studies on democratization have suggested, societies that are shaped by crosscutting cleavages have a higher chance of cultivating peaceful coexistence and democratization.¹³ Under the circumstances, the transformation in relations between Turkey's key Islamic actors reflect the presence of a more sophisticated social structure than previous assumptions have suggested. This should also encourage students of Turkish politics or Islamist movements to be more eager to free themselves from the domination of "Middle East exceptionalism" and relate their work to general studies of comparative politics.

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NOTES

¹ In this analysis "Islamist" refers to political parties and actors that seek to harmonize the political system with Islamic principles. "Islamic" refers to all kinds of actors and institutions that consider Islam as a guide in the social, economic, and political aspects of their lives and includes but is not limited to Islamist parties and individuals.

² The AKP is considered a neo-Islamist party, as the founders of the party come from Islamist backgrounds but the party pursues an agenda that is considerably different from its predecessors' and embraces a more moderate approach to the role of Islam in politics.

³ Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996); Adrian Karatnycky, "Muslim Countries and Democracy Gap," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13 (2002); Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994).

⁴ Lisa Anderson, "Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Argument," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble (eds.), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World Volume 1* (Boulder-London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), p. 77-92; Jacob Gerner Hariri, "A Contribution to the Understanding of Middle Eastern and Muslim Exceptionalism," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 2015), p. 477-90; Daniel Brumberg, "Islam is not the Solution (or the Problem)," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 2005), p. 97-116.

⁵ Hakan Yavuz, "Cleansing Islam from the Public Sphere," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2000), pp. 21-42.

⁶ Michael Hudson, "The Middle East," *Political Science and Politics* Vol. 34, No. 4 (October 2001), pp. 801-04.

⁷ Gregory Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2011.

⁸ Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

⁹ Kadri Gursel, "AKP-Cemaat Savasinda Neyi Savunmalıyız?" ["What Should We Defend in the AKP-Cemaat War?"], *Milliyet*, December 8, 2013.

¹⁰ Ekrem Aytas, "Arinc'tan Dersane Aciklamasi" ["Arinc's Dersane Explanation"], *Zaman*. December 2, 2013.

¹¹ Huseyin Gulerce, "Sasirdim, Uzuldum, Yaralandim," ["I am Puzzled, Sad, and Hurt"], *Zaman*, November 22, 2013.

¹² Serif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 102, No. 1, *Post-Traditional Societies* (Winter 1973), pP. 169-90.

¹³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960); Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, "Geography, Religion and Social Class: Cross-Cutting Cleavages in

Norwegian Politics," in Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (Toronto: The Free Press, 1967); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).