

Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion, and the Nation State, by Umut Azak. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010. xv + 177 pages. Notes to p. 212. Bibl. to p. 229. Index to p. 234. \$92.00

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Islam and Secularism in Turkey is an insightful historical analysis of the Turkish secularists' fear and perception of *irtica* (Islamic reactionism). The book traces the origin of this perception through the examination of the Menemen incident (1930), the state imposition of the Turkish *ezan* (call to prayer) (1932-33) and the lifting of the ban on the Arabic *ezan* (1950), the Malatya incident (1952), the secularist reaction to Said Nursi (1959-60), and Alevism in alliance with Kemalism (1966). Umut Azak's exploration of these events is an exemplary scholarly work given its objectivity and the fact that it is based on primary sources. Her survey of periodicals and other historical documents from the 1930s to the 1960s is very impressive.

According to Azak, a major Kemalist strategy to eliminate *irtica* is to redefine "Islam on the basis of an opposition between Turkish Islam (personal, enlightened, rational, national) and reactionary Islam (political, backward, superstitious, Arab)" (p. 175). As these overly romanticizing and abstract characteristics stress, the Kemalist project of transforming Islam has remained very vague. Some Kemalists have attempted to present the Alevi understanding of Islam as the Turkish Islam; but it only increased the level of ambiguity on this issue. As Azak rightly emphasizes, "In any case, the Kemalist state's restriction and control of Sunni Islam did not necessarily mean promotion of Alevism. On the practical level, the state conceived Sunnism as the par default religion of the nation and fought reactionary Islam by the means of the nationalization of Sunnism" (p. 144). The author also notes that the state's Directorate of Religious Affairs never recognized Alevism as a religious entity and during the Dersim incident of 1937-8 the Kemalist state massacred 10 percent of the province's Kurdish Alevi population (p. 147).

In addition to its project of transforming Islam, Kemalism has also focused on the exclusion of Islam from the public sphere by authoritarian means. The Kemalists have embraced a radical version of assertive secularism, which requires the state to play an assertive role to confine religion to the private domain. Therefore, the Kemalists have opposed public visibility of any religion, either Islam or Christianity, and any Islamic groups, either Sunnis or Alevis. As Azak emphasizes, when the Kemalist state closed down the Sufi lodges and forbade religious titles, it did not differentiate Sunni or Alevi groups. In some cases, the Kemalist generals have instrumentally used (Sunni or Alevi understandings of) Islam for tactical purposes, such as avoiding communism, motivating soldiers, and homogenizing society, but this generally meant a temporary strategy in their permanently assertive secularist project of minimizing the role of religion into a matter of conscience (*vicdan*). Azak's emphasis on the Kemalist goal of producing a Turkish Islam and my highlighting on its exclusion of religion from the public sphere are actually complementary.

Kemalism has sought to create an individualized Islam confined to the private sphere and that would serve best to its aim of excluding religion from public life.

Another aspect of the book that relates it to contemporary debates is its attempt to reveal the links between history and present. The book adequately explains how contemporary Kemalists remember and utilize historical cases. It could have had more emphasis on the conservative Muslims' perception of the same cases, because some events analyzed in the book, such as the state ban on Arabic *ezan* and persecution of Said Nursi, are in fact traumatic for primarily conservative Muslims. Regarding other cases, the overwhelming majority of conservative Muslims and liberal intellectuals in today's Turkey would argue that tragic events, such as the Menemen, Malatya, and Council of State incidents, were profoundly manipulated by the Kemalist "deep state" (currently named as Ergenekon). In this regard, the conservatives and liberals largely regard *irtica* as a discourse used by the Kemalists to pursue a witch-hunt against the opposition and to preserve the assertive secularist power, status, and interests.

Islam and Secularism in Turkey is a must-read for those who seek to understand secularism in Turkey. I recommend it to students of Turkish politics, in particular, and those of secularism, in general.