

A Critique of Western Modernity and the Narrative about Turkey as “Model State”

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Abstract: Turkey has long been depicted by Western circles as a ‘model state’ for the rest of the Muslim world on account of its secular modernity, level of democracy and economic advancement. The literature about Turkey as a model-state appears to neglect or treat lightly the three interrelated themes without which this debate is bound to remain superficial. In order to expand the contours of this discussion, this study seeks to shed light on the following questions, which also point to the arguments being made: First, to what extent is the Turkish model impregnated with Western secular modernity? Second, is the stress on the Turkish model part and parcel of the overall discursive asymmetry between the West and the Rest, which involves a strong tinge of imperialism and an orientalist narrative about the “underdeveloped” / “uncivilised” Arabs or Muslims? Third, is it not proper for the literature about the model state (Turkey) to employ a new terminology such as “exemplary state” which is less ideologically-charged and more reliably oriented towards the economic, social and political performance of a given state. In the latter case, state actors, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, could likewise qualify as possible exemplary states, alongside Turkey.

Keywords: Model state, theory of modernization, Turkish modernization, laicism, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, exemplary state.

Öz: Türkiye uzun bir süredir laik modernleşmesi, demokrasi düzeyi ve ekonomik kalkınmışlık düzeyi itibarıyla Batılı çevrelerce İslam dünyası için bir “model ülke” olarak lanse edilmiştir. Türkiye’nin bir “model ülke” olarak kavramsallaştırılması bağlamında birbiriyle bağlantılı olan üç meselenin genellikle göz ardı edildiği ya da hafife alındığı gözlenmektedir. Bu konudaki literatüre belli bir derinlik katmak amacıyla, bu çalışmada, aynı zamanda ortaya konan argümana da işaret eden şu sorulara ışık tutulmaya çalışılacaktır: Birincisi, Türk modeli ne ölçüde Batılı laik modernitenin etkisi altındadır? İkincisi, “Türk modeli”ne yapılan vurgu, büyük ölçüde emperyalizmin mührünü taşıyan ve “azgelişmiş” / “gayrı medeni” Araplar’a ya da Müslümanlar’a ilişkin oryantalist anlatıya yaslanan Batı ile Diğerleri arasındaki söylemsel asimetrisinin bir uzantısı mıdır? Üçüncüsü, bir model ülke olarak Türkiye’ye ilişkin literatürün, nispeten daha az ideolojik bir içeriği sahip olan ve daha ikna edici görünen, bir ülkenin iktisadi, sosyal ve siyasi performansını esas alan “örnek ülke” benzeri yeni bir kavramı esas alması daha isabetli olmaz mı? Bu son durumda, Malezya ve Endonezya gibi devlet-aktörler, Türkiye’yle birlikte örnek ülkeler olarak temayüz edebileceklerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Model ülke, modernleşme teorisi, Türk modernleşmesi, laiklik, Avrupa-merkezcilik, Oryantalizm, örnek ülke.

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Introduction

Turkey has been customarily depicted by international supporters of the “Turkish model” as the epitome of Western modernity and thus deserving to be emulated by other Muslim states, especially by the Arab world.¹ It is well-known that the process of Turkish modernization in the Republican era (from 1923 onwards) involved the acceptance of deeply-rooted assumptions about the superiority of Western civilisation and the “backwardness” of the non-Western world. That the Turkish ruling elite chose to attach themselves to the Western world in general and align themselves with Western institutions such as NATO, Council of Europe, and OECD after the Second World War served to solidify this perception about Turkey. Perhaps putting aside the last few years, which have been replete with mutual mistrust and disagreements, during the AK Party rule, the “Turkish model” continued to be presented especially to the Arab world as the right path to modernity, peace and democracy in, so to speak, the ever-unstable, authoritarian and impoverished Arab world. The dominant view of Turkey as the face of moderate Islam was supplemented in this era with a sparkling vision of the state which had been engaged in impressive economic growth and embarked on liberal political and economic reforms. This article draws on the dark side of the Turkish model by pointing to a number of its defects: first, it is asserted that Turkey’s radical engagement with Western modernity, at the heart of which was secularism (in Turkey, laicism), in the early Republican era was not only socially painful and dislocating, but was also profoundly authoritarian. Second, the Western discourse about the Turkish model is more ideologically-tinged than is often recognized, because the project is intended in part to perpetuate the subjugation of the Muslim world to Western hegemony.

This article begins with a discussion of the concept of the “model state” and seeks to identify its key components. It is argued that there are reasons to highlight Muslim states, besides Turkey, such as Indonesia, Iran or Malaysia, on account of their peculiar experience and/or achievements which render them “exemplary states” in some respects. Next, this article focuses on the theory of modernization and its deployment at the service of Western colonialism and imperialism. It then proceeds with an analysis of the process of Turkish modernization which, at its inception, was based on an uncritical reception of legal norms, concepts, institutions and ideas from the West, the latter of which was seen as *the* supreme and unri-

1 Among a list of articles and other works on the topic of Turkey-as-model which have manifested sizeable increase during the AK Party rule, it is suffice to draw on a segment of the literature: Mohapatra, (2008, pp. 271-294); Altunışık (2005, pp. 45-63); Fuller (2004, pp. 51-84); Al-Azm (2011, pp. 633-641); Secor (2011, pp. 157-172); Göksel (2012, pp. 99-120); Dede (2011, pp. 23-32).

valled civilisation. This ideal was extolled to such an extent that, opposition to the westernising reforms in Turkey was almost sure to be confronted by severe state brutality. The final part of this essay, before the Conclusion, argues that, until a few years ago, the largely Western narrative about Turkey as model for the Arab world in particular gained greater credence with the ascent to power of the (morally and culturally) Islamic-leaning Justice and Development Party (hereinafter, AK Party) in 2002. This was because, the first, members of the AK Party government could be more easily associated with “moderate Islam” in comparison with the previously dominant ruling elite that had weaker religious roots, and, the second, successive AK Party governments embarked on impressive infrastructural projects, establishing an ever more efficient administrative system, managing to secure vast upward expansion of the Turkish economy, and finally reduced the stratum of the population living below the poverty line. This study ends with a two-fold conclusion: first, it ought to be recognized that there is no linear progress towards an absolute modernity, as many in the West have suggested for many decades in reference to the European experience of secular modernity, and therefore the way forward is to accept multiple modernities; second, it is better to describe Turkey as an “exemplary state” instead of portraying it as a “model state” because, first, the former is not as ideologically-charged as the latter and, second, the former is a more apt description of Turkey under the AK Party government on account of its relatively successful democratic system and rapidly developing economy and infrastructure.

Key Features of the “Model State”

The subject of the “model state” seems to not have been taken up seriously in the literature of International Relations discipline. The term “model state” is often loosely used by scholars, journalists and practitioners when discussing the topic under consideration. This indicates that the narrative about Turkey-as-model is casual, lacks convincing theoretical insight and is devoid of intellectual coherence due to its superficiality. What is more, as yet, there is no theory which explains why certain states can serve as role models for some, while others are not recounted at all. In order to make a modest contribution to the literature, this paper intends to shed some light on some of the key features of model states and the peculiar qualities which they are supposed to possess so that these qualities can be emulated by other actors. It should be said that, in order for one actor to emulate another, the model state and the receiver state are likely to have some political, cultural, geographic or economic resemblance so that the “importation” of ideas or institutions from the model becomes a plausible policy-choice. We know that certain states

possess laws and political institutions that are rooted in a particular tradition and have proven themselves to be workable, useful, and, most crucially, sustainable which makes the act of emulation a rewarding enterprise. Besides, a model rests on a theoretically solid and consistent body of ideas and practices. When a particular model is associated with a state, it is expected to instil in the citizenry an identifiable sense of purpose and more or less predictable patterns of behaviour towards the state.

States that serve as “models” for others have mostly gone through a radical transformation from below, i.e. through revolution, and established new norms, institutional structures and, in some cases, new strategies of political economy. The model state could be liberal, socialist or, say, Islamic. Indeed states with “emancipatory liberal revolutions” such as the USA and France; those that experienced socialist revolutions such as Cuba and China; or a Muslim state such as Iran which has endeavoured to introduce Islamic politics, laws and institutions following the Islamic revolution in 1979, are among the prominent examples of model states which have led the way for others to emulate. It is also possible that a state which is home to stable political and institutional structures for a very long time, as in the case of Britain, may likewise be considered as a model for others. Sometimes Scandinavian social democratic systems are highlighted as successful models that combine economic prosperity, fair income distribution, political liberty and environmental sensitivity. The Chinese model is also highlighted in some quarters, not only as a socialist experiment in the Far East, but also as an “authoritarian model” that has achieved impressive economic growth for about forty years. In the view of many observers, China can be described as “a seemingly modernizing autocracy that has delivered an annual growth rate over ten percent for three decades.” (McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008, p. 83). If impressive performance in working out a sustainable democracy is a major criterion for a state to become a model, then there is no doubt that, although a non-Western state, India could possibly be a good choice by virtue of its combination of powerful economic growth with a functioning democracy. Indeed multiparty democracy and political freedoms have remained a major characteristic of India’s political system against innumerable odds, such as low income level, low literacy rate, and ethnic and religious heterogeneity. The Indian case serves to challenge the main presuppositions of modernization and democracy theories.²

The term “model state” may also be used to refer to an actor which, in particular, by virtue of its economic strength, high degree of legitimacy wielded by its political

2 On Indian democracy, see Kohli (2001); Guha(2007); Rudolph ve Rudol (2015).

system and the social dynamism of its people, is depicted as an "exemplary state". Proponents of "model Turkey" largely adhere to this formulation. In this second definition, the term "model" is used to single out Turkey as a "well-functioning Muslim state" which can be usefully imitated by other Muslim nations. If we are to establish that Turkey is an "inspiring example" of a "go-getter" state and society, it could come to constitute an "exemplary state". The term "exemplary state" is thus not strongly tinged with the ideological presuppositions of the dominant Western discourse such as the need to dislodge religion from the public sphere, a linear notion of history whose point of reference is the Western enlightenment, a heavy emphasis on individualism and materialism, a condescending attitude towards communal values, traditions and collective morality, and a centring of Western history as opposed to the decentering of the history of the rest. Therefore, while the model state is highlighted by Western hegemonic actors as agents of the Western path to modernity and the Western worldview, the exemplary state is acclaimed for, first, increasing the welfare of its people through the hard-won means of economic and social development such as diversification of trade, increasing the level of education, and progress in technology, and, second, for establishing peaceful coexistence among its people. For a Muslim state to foster indigenous values and norms that could harness the population's self-respect, cultural integrity and trust in the tangible role which their state could play in the international arena, also brings it closer to being an exemplary state. Whether, based on this definition, a case can be made for Turkey (as well as for some other Muslim states), is discussed in the remaining sections of this essay. At this point, it is propitious to ask the question whether Turkey is the *primus inter pares* that can today serve as the "role model", in the sense of being an exemplary state, for the rest of the Muslim world.

It ought to be recognized that Turkey is not the only Muslim country which manifests certain qualities and characteristics that set it apart as a "model" for the Muslim world.³ If one looks into the criteria such as the level of economic growth and organizational discipline, then countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Iran could likewise be considered as "models". It is known that Malaysia has managed to achieve impressive economic growth in the last few decades⁴ and has been ruled by governments (reasonably) freely elected by the people since its independence in

3 In this part of the discussion, the term "model state" is used as meaning "exemplary state".

4 Malaysia's GNP per capita in 2017 stands at roughly 9660 dollars; however, this figure jumps at around 28,870 dollars, as of 27 November 2017, when calculated on the basis of purchasing power. ("GDP per capita by country (Malaysia)", 2017)

1957. Besides, the educational level of its people is fairly high⁵, the economic and social conditions of women have been evidently enhanced, and the country has managed to establish peaceful coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups based on its official policy of embracing diversity and multiculturalism. Besides, a “Malaysian” identity has been built with reasonable success. According to Khairy Jamaluddin, behind the Malaysian success lies a moderate, flexible and tolerant version of Islam and the ability to establish harmony between Islam and modernism (Jamaluddin, 2003).

As said before, Iran too is occasionally singled out as a possible “model state” in the Muslim world. The Iranian Islamic Revolution is the first mass mobilization of a Muslim nation that successfully rose up against the Shah’s corrupt dictatorship and brought down the monarchy in 1979 and then established a republic based on an Islamic political system, Islamic laws and institutions. This uniqueness in fashioning a system based (to the extent it is possible) *wholly* on Islamic politics sets Iran apart from other Muslim countries. The Islamic regime has now a history of 38 years behind it, which makes it an interesting “political laboratory” for other Muslim countries to study and draw lessons from. The likelihood of the resurgence of Islam as a *political* force will almost certainly increase the relevance of the Iranian Islamic model. Iran’s apparent success in developing its own technology, increasing its peoples’ level of education and its prominent international stature has combined to highlight this country as a special case. Should Iran succeed in fashioning greater transparency and political participation, while ending the privilege of the clergy in politics, it could become a fine example to emulate at least for other Islamic-oriented governments and movements (Aslan, 2003).

In the same context, Bassam Tibi, in an article he wrote in 1995, highlighted Indonesia as a possible model for the Muslim world. He based his argument on two pillars: first, although a host to roughly three hundred ethno-cultural groups, Indonesia allowed each of them the right of self-expression and accorded them a reasonable degree of freedom. In this most populous of Muslim countries, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists lived side by side peacefully. Second, Indonesia went through a rapid economic growth at the time⁶ (Tibi, 1995). Since then, Indonesia has continued to manifest a thriving economy and ever-maturing democracy.⁷

5 In 2015, the literacy rate in Malaysia stood at 94.6 percent. (“Malaysia - Adult (15+) literacy rate”, 2015) In Turkey, the literacy rate in 2015 was 95.6 percent. (“Turkey - Adult literacy rate”, 2015).

6 See, also, Christopher B. Roberts et al (2015).

7 In 2016, Indonesia’s GNP reached 932 billion dollars which exceeded that of Turkey. The GNP per capita of its population was 3604 dollars, while the same figure jumped to 11,720 dollars when calculated

One anticipates that the "exemplary state", and not the ideologically-charged "model state" which is mostly associated (solely) with Turkey, should possess certain virtues and qualifications that inspire other Muslim states to act in a similar way. Besides, such a state is likely to display a willingness and ability to take initiatives and to lead the way for others to follow in its footsteps. Similar to the pivotal role played by France and Germany in the launching and deepening of European integration after the Second World War, the "exemplary state" has the potential to formulate policies and embark on projects which may lead the way towards, *inter alia*, economic and political integration among Muslim countries.

This article begins with a discussion of the theory of modernization which is the precise point at which the Turkish "model", which is a fingerprint imitation of a Eurocentric conception of modernization, could be traced.

Theory of Modernization

One could argue, as I do, that the main conceptual tool that can provide an explanatory framework in order to make sense of Turkey as a "model state" is the "modernization theory". In other words, it is first and foremost the modernization theory which enables us to make sense of the conceptual presuppositions, ideas and motives of those who draw on the "Turkish exception" as a "success story", and thus turn Turkey into a "model". It is known that the modernization theory⁸ is based on the assumption that the European and North American path to economic, political and social "emancipation", centring on capitalism and (secular) liberalism, has become the norm for other, non-Western societies aspiring to become active participants of history. In other words, the theory is premised on a linear notion of progress which is universally applicable, objective and culturally neutral. In this view, "culture, values, morality, and religion, represent only particularisms, aspects of the superstructure, masking the underlying empirical truth to be found in economic structures." (Mirsepassi, 2000, p. 9). The specific histories and cultural

in purchasing power. The growth rate of the country was 5 percent in 2016, the rate of inflation floated around 3,5 percent, and the unemployment rate stood at roughly 5,6 percent. ("Indonesia - Gross domestic product per capita in current prices", 2017) With the exception of per capita income, these statistics indicate a more favourable performance than those for Turkey. Finally, the average rate of literacy in Indonesia in 2015 was 95,4 percent which was more or less the same as Turkey. ("Indonesia: Literacy rate from 2006 to 2016, total and by gender", 2016).

8 On the theory of modernization, see Lipset (1959, pp. 69-105); Lipset (1960); Rostow (1960); Dahl (1971); Lerner (1958).

peculiarities of non-Western societies will be eventually taken over by the forces of modernization. This process will eventually minimize differences between various cultures and civilisations. What is more, in this approach, indigenous economic and political strategies in Asia and Africa, which are at variance with the main assumptions of the modernization theory, are incapable of delivering prosperity and freedom for the people. In other words, the modernization theory conceives heterogeneity in international society as transitory, because it “anticipates the eventual homogenization of difference into sameness.” (Blaney & Inayatullah, 2000, p. 104). The theory privileges Western culture as the key to the success of Western societies, while non-Western cultures are condemned to negative descriptions hindering progress. As well put by Mirsepassi, “the liberal vision of modernity...considers Western culture an essential part of modernization, viewing non-Western cultures and traditions as fundamentally hostile to modernity and incompatible with modernization.” (Mirsepassi, p. 2).

The modernization theory is thus deeply entangled with Orientalist assumptions, formulated in the West, regarding the “backwardness of oriental cultures”, “oriental despotism”, “the absence of humanitarian traditions in Africa and Asia”, “religious fanaticism” and “the lack of rational thinking in the orient”. This suggests that non-Western values, cultures and traditions are incapable of contributing to the shaping of the modern world, because they are not sufficiently “civilised”. The discourse of modernity is precisely designed, *inter alia*, to set obstacles to the possibility of non-Western contributions to modernity and social change (Mirsepassi, p. 12). In spite of Said’s seminal *Orientalism* (1978) and the vast body of post-colonial literature which the book has engendered, the bulk of Western scholarship has sadly reverted to its orientalist presuppositions and misrepresentation when dwelling on Middle Eastern societies and politics. What is more, critical scholarship on *Orientalism* has mostly failed to make a tangible impact on policy-makers in the West.

The theory of modernization gives a privileged status to Western civilisation as the peak of human emancipation. This suggests that the concept of “civilisation” is neither neutral nor value-free. It signifies power imbalances between the West and the rest. The culture of the modern West gives itself the privilege of assessing and measuring “the other”. In this perspective, the otherness of non-Western societies has to be overcome through their assimilation into the process of modernity (Blaney & Inayatullah, p. 113).

The Process of Turkish Modernization

As is well-known, the dominant international system, as represented by the West for a very long time up until the second half of the 20th century and perhaps even after, conferred on Turkey some degree of "recognition" as it "succeeded" in denying its "otherness" in the 1920s and 30s. Indeed the Republican top-down "reforms" during the period in question resulted in a wholesale transformation of state and society for the intended goal of the de-Islamization and westernization of Turkey. Centres of religious learning (*medreses*⁹) and sufic lodges (*tekkes*) as well as Quranic schools and courses were closed, the Caliphate was abolished, many mosques were closed, the Arabic alphabet was supplanted by the Western alphabet, the Turkish language was cleansed of many Arabic words, laicism became the basis of the state ideology, Islamic codes of behaviour and dress were either banned or discouraged, and the Islamic calendar was replaced by the Western calendar, etc.

The process of Turkish modernization in the Republican era was thus premised on the belief in the superiority of Western civilisation. Not surprisingly, therefore, "civilised" and "uncivilised" modes of behaviour were closely monitored by Turkish reformers soon after Turkey was declared a republic in 1923. During the period of wholesale importation of European laws and values in the 1920s and 30s, the social/cultural styles and manners of the West were held at high esteem, while aesthetics, modes of behaviour and habits which were peculiar to "Turkish" and/or "Islamic" culture were generally resented; accordingly, they were repressed (Göle, 1998, p. 62). No doubt, then, Turkish modernization represents a civilisational transformation, a flight from the world of Islam into the anticipated wonders of Western civilisation.

In the specific case of Turkey, then, we can safely assert that, based on the dominant discourse on modernity, the state "succeeded" in piercing the veil of "oriental backwardness" by means of Atatürk's westernising reforms. Through gaining greater familiarity with the Western enlightenment project, it was therewith, at least superficially, "entitled" to participate in the modern world on a par with the Western group of nations. Turkey could thus, then (and today), perform this role by becoming a "model" for other "oriental" Muslims to emulate. In other words, Turkey could find a place for itself in the "modern world" provided that it accepted a submissive role for itself: an agent in the spreading of Western modernity.

9 In *medreses*, positive sciences were likewise taught.

Turkey's modernization venture appears to manifest four characteristics which have shaped the Turkish particularity: first, it is based on a linear notion of history which assumes that tomorrow will be better than today; second, it takes it for granted that modernization should be carried out by the state in accordance with the latter's dictates and designs; third, it believes that the society ought to be strictly controlled by the state, so that the state can fulfil its mission to "civilise" them. It is the "enlightened" state elites, so to speak, who know what is best for the "backward" masses; fourth, it takes for granted the radical polarity between tradition and modernity (Dönmez, 2011, pp. 46-49). Westernization constituted the main pillar of the state ideology in the early Republican Turkey. This was a top-down reform process embarked on by the state. The westernizing reforms put the state over and above society –a society that constituted a (homogenous) nation-state. From the perspective of Kemalist modernity, the state held a privileged political and philosophical position which meant that it had the "right" to "define" society (Kahraman & Keyman, 1998, p. 71).

The Kemalist modernization project was premised on a view of the "Ottoman past" as the "other" of the goal of westernization. This orientalist narrative considered the daily life of society in Turkey as "something" that had to be modernized. Therefore, during the Turkish process of (radical) westernization, the orientalist narrative which accompanied this process served mainly two goals: externally, it served as an instrument of legitimation for the Turkish modernization project; internally, it played a pivotal role in the redefinition and reproduction of the (superior) state-(subordinate) individual relations in Turkey (Kahraman & Keyman, p. 73).

In the Turkish case, contrary to the late Ottoman era when attempts at reforms did not necessarily create deepening cleavages between state and society, from the early republican era, such defects came to manifest themselves in the form of strong nationalism, state-centrism and (at times) xenophobia as the defining characteristics of Turkey's co-optation into modernization. The history of modernization in Turkey is thus a "history of westernization" (Kahraman & Keyman, p. 70).

The primacy of nationalism, nation-statism, laicism and Westernism are, then, the key ingredients of the "Turkish model". This is also the "story" of Turkey that has chosen to shed its Islamic and Oriental heritage in order to gain "normalcy" as seen through the eyes of the Western world. This "unique story" indeed sets her apart from other Muslim countries, especially from the Arab world and Iran, which did not go through similarly "successful" state-imposed radical/laicist transformation (at least, not to the same extent as Turkey). As the most fundamental challenge to this co-optation into Western standards of civilisation, religious segments of

Turkish society have not since been (adequately) co-opted into this state-imposed identity, worldview and narrative that sanctify the 'nation' –as opposed to the *um-mah*- this-worldliness, materialism, and laicism. Religious segments of society tend (to various degrees) to conceive Turkey as part of the large Muslim *ummah*.

To the extent that Arabs and other Muslim peoples could be associated with the Islamic/Ottoman past, they were stigmatised by the Republican state elites as "backward", "fanatical", "sensual" and "treacherous". The forcible change of traditional lifestyle and identity, denial of the (Muslim) past, and unceasing state repression have combined to upset the ontological security of the populace in Turkey. Indeed the process of radical westernization since the foundation of the Turkish Republic has caused deep trauma and schizophrenia at the socio-psychological level. Samuel Huntington considers Turkey as a *torn country* because "a single predominant culture which places it in one civilization", is, at the hands of its leaders, replaced with "another civilization". (Huntington, 1996, p. 138). According to Huntington, describing itself as a "bridge" between two civilisations, West and East, which was a common description of Turkey's strategic role prior to AK Party's rise to power in 2002, does not do any favour to Turkey. He asserts that "a bridge... is an artificial creation connecting two solid entities but is part of neither. When Turkey's leaders term their country a bridge, they euphemistically confirm that it is torn" (Huntington, p. 149).

As anticipated by the critical views on the theory of modernization, Turkey's path to enlightenment and modernity was imbued with an authoritarian (even totalitarian) political structure. Apart from the continuous state repression which was most intense until 1950, the following characterized the state-society relations for the good part of the Republican era: forcible assimilation of the Kurds right from the outset; unceasing military coup d'états against elected governments in the name of Kemalism¹⁰ the last of which was launched in 1997 in the form of a 'post-modern coup d'état'; low human rights standards; widespread torture until the last decade. Turkish venture in modernization has taken Islam -and all those who could be associated with Islam, like the Ottomans and the Arabs-, as the "other" of the "enlightenment" which had to be wiped out from the public sphere. Its outright hostility towards religion and all the values emanating from Islam was bound to create a dangerous confrontation between the people and the regime. Thus, the regime took an authoritarian and repressive character no sooner than

10 He term refers to top-down and wholesale Westernization project based on coercive strategies. It has been the official ideology of the state in Turkey, which, in the form of a republic, was founded by Mustafa Kemal in 1923, who received the surname, "Atatürk", in 1934.

the Republic was proclaimed in October 1923. A total “war” was to be waged in the name of *mission civilisatrice* to “enlighten” the “Turks”. Although Turkey has made significant headways in consolidating democracy and advancing human rights standards since the repressive and homogenizing dictates of the early republican era (before the 1950s), “laicism” continues to remain the most essential component of the Turkish political system.

Changing Fortunes of the Turkish Model since 2002

In Turkey, as in other Muslim countries, Islamization of society in the past few decades has largely come about by the changing dynamics of society and has found echoes in the day-to-day life experience of ordinary Muslims. In a given Muslim society, such a societal change is almost always founded on deep indigenous currents which rules out explanations that seek to attribute increasing religiosity of the Muslim community to some conspiratorial plots from inside and outside. By contrast, although not as devastating and comprehensive as the Turkish case, attempts to diminish the impact of Islam in the public sphere in Muslim-majority states has almost always come about through top-down dictatorial impositions by authoritarian regimes bent on “cleansing” the public sphere from Islam and Islamic perspectives.¹¹ Laicism –if understood as the political project intended to restrict, control and contain Islam and the Muslim faithful- can thus only operate “successfully” in Muslim societies through a combination of coercion and intimidation against (pious) Muslims and through a state-imposed polarisation of society along ethnic, sectarian and/or ideological divisions in which case the “state” pretends to act as the referee among conflicting interests and priorities. Seen through the glance of ordinary Muslims whose views of Islam are shaped by Islamic precepts, laicism/secularism could be considered as an alien and artificial transplantation into the Muslim world at the hands of modernizing elites that have conceived of modernization and westernization as synonyms.

There is no doubt that the religiosity of the people in Turkey has largely increased since the Cold War. Greater internal awareness of the starkness of a materialistic life was combined externally with the tragic victimisation of Muslim nations at the hands of the “Christian and/or infidel West”, as in the case of the genocide against the Muslims of Bosnia during the course of 1992-95, unceasing

11 Hamdi makes the following remark on the subject: “The only way that secularism can be kept alive in the Islamic world is by local Muslim dictatorships, supported by Western power.” (Hamdi, 1996, p. 84).

ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the capture of their homeland by the Israeli war machine, and the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) by Western "crusaders" before the silent gaze of international institutions such as the United Nations. It can be confidently claimed that, today, Turkish society has become more religious than ever since the onset of the Republican era, while Islam has also become a source of identity for a growing number of people. This is first and foremost a case of self-discovery, increasing religiosity, and a search for meaning in life. However, as said, increasing Islamic awareness should also be placed into its proper global, political and economic context. This is well-observed by Işın: "Islam has become credible among the critical middle classes precisely because, especially in its moderate versions, it provides an alternative to Western subjugation and modernization, and a link to tradition and history." (Işın, 2001, p. 363).

Certainly, the AK Party government, in power since 2002, is known to have a positive view of Islam, Islamic civilisation and Islamic morality. Indeed it has sought to convey Islamic values into the public sphere hoping that this will enrich social solidarity, enhance religiosity, solidify common morality, and foster indigenous cultural values. However, it has to be admitted that, in spite of the history of 15-years of rule behind the AK Party, today Islam rarely makes its way into the public sphere unless it is reduced to an aggregate of worships, rituals and ethical injunctions. The purported reconciliation between Islam and democracy, even in *today's* Turkey, is "recognized" to the extent that Muslim devotees accept the subordination of Islam to secular institutions, conventions and legal norms. While in the past, such equation was sustained through coercion, intimidation and ceaseless propaganda at schools and in the media, today, in Turkey, this is sustained by an implicit "social contract" between the ruling party, the populace, and former political establishment, both inside and outside.

Seen through the lens of the dominant actors within the global system, at least before acute tensions broke out between Turkey and the West since, say, 2013, Turkey seemed to steer a middle course between capitalism, secularism, political liberalism and mild religiosity. In this period, international and domestic actors sought to make the most of the Turkish experience in order to make use of Islam as a surrogate for legitimizing the modernist paradigm under the umbrella of "liberal democracy" -similar to the role played by Protestantism in Western history. The term "moderate Islam" has been used by Western advocates of the Turkish model to highlight Turkish Islam as the ideal archetype which could and should be repeated by other Muslim societies. Particularly during the AK Party era, Turkey, alongside its "success" in constraining the role of Islam, was also seen by Western

circles to be deserving the role of model state” by virtue of its impressive economic growth after 2002. Highlighting Turkey as an exemplary state, inter alia, because of its steady economic growth and (secular) liberal political system reflects the spirit of the age, in spite of the emergence of rising powers such as China and India, still putting the West at the centre and all the rest at the periphery. The spirit also emphasizes economic prosperity as the most essential goal of governance. In this perspective, issues beyond materialism and individualism such as cultural cohesion, identity, tradition, social and cultural solidarity, religiosity, chastity, morality, and family values are rarely conceived as goals which governments should strive for. Since 2002, on occasion, the AK Party leadership acted in ways which gave the impression that they felt at ease with the idea of Turkey as a “model state”. Indeed during his tour of North African countries in the midst of the Arab spring in 2011, the then Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdoğan, “advised” the Arab political elites in North Africa to opt for secularism¹² which is *the key* ingredient of the Turkish model. Therefore, to use a concept formulated by Sayyed in *A Fundamental Fear*, despite the AK Party experience in the last 15 years, Western modernity, secularism and the conception of international society, by and large, still act as the “master signifier” (Sayyed, 2003) in contemporary Turkey.

Although from time to time, the AK Party leadership, in distancing themselves from some of the key assumptions of the paradigm of (Western) modernism, draw on the worthiness of the tradition and Islamic precepts, successive AK Party governments have defined their goals in worldly terms, such as deepening and consolidating Turkish democracy, protecting human rights, implementing a free market economy. (Dönmez, p. 44) In politics, the main frame of reference for the AK Party is not Islam, but a set of ideas and principles reflecting predominantly the Western model. (Dönmez, p. 44) For the AK Party, Islam serves as social glue that keeps different sub-cultures and identities together. Even today, under an allegedly –as some foreign observers repeatedly and falsely claim– “Islamist” government, the realm of politics is kept largely distant from religious injunctions and precepts. (Dönmez, p. 45, 54)

Apparently, the narrative about Turkey-as-model-state has subsided since the escalation of tensions between Turkey on the one hand, and Europe and the United States on the other, especially after the Gezi Park protests of 2013. During the course of this confrontation, the West has constantly blamed Turkey for sliding into authoritarianism, while Turkey has accused the West for harbouring imperial am-

12 (“Erdoğan offers ‘Arab Spring’ neo-laicism”, 2011).

bitions in the country. The subversion of the political aspirations of the Arab peoples as epitomized by the "Arab Spring" and the descent of Syria, Yemen and Libya into endless and messy wars similarly diminished the popularity of the "Turkish model" (here, meaning, "exemplary state"), which, for Arab streets, had been considered inspirational for combining political freedom, self-respect, economic and social welfare, and a dignified foreign policy. Today, perhaps not surprisingly, the literature is replete with claims about the "fall of the Turkish model".¹³ However, granting that the discourse about Turkey as a "model" has not been an ephemeral one, but one which has deep roots involving Western attempts at perpetuating its hegemony over the Muslim world, the long-held Orientalist assumptions about the unruly "other", and mono-centric conceptions of Western modernization, capitalism and secularism, means that the current "ebb" in the model discourse is likely to "flow" once the acrimonious encounter between Turkey and the West is over.

Conclusion

In the light of what has been said, the narrative of the "Turkish model" which, during the AK Party era, has come to combine secularism and modernity with a (more or less) functioning democratic political system and rapid economic growth, represents an orientalist view of the Muslim world. This narrative also fails to engage in a critical reflection of the painful process of westernization which caused much social, cultural and political suffering on account of authoritarian top down social engineering, suppression of the political opposition, and the polarization of society from the 1920s onwards in Turkey.

The undeniable reality of multiple modernities is largely accepted today.¹⁴ The Western path to modernity is only one among a vast array of alternative paths to modernization. If cultures and civilisations are to co-exist peacefully, there needs to be a genuine exchange of ideas and experiences between the West and the Rest, without privileging any one standpoint. In the words of Hamdi, "there is no chance for a constructive dialogue among cultures and civilizations as long as those who dominate the public discourse in the West continue to see themselves as the upholders of political and moral standards for the entire world." (Hamdi, p.82). The debate about Turkey as model state, rather strangely and anachronistically, appears as an embodiment of this monopolizing discourse in our "post-modern" age when the

13 See, for instance, Tuğal (2016); Sengupta (2016); Ekşi (2016).

14 On multiple modernization, see. *Eisenstadt* (2002); Wei-Ming (1996). For a critique of the narrative about Western modernity, see Bhabra (2007).

failings and limits of Western modernity have surfaced and a plurality of non-western civilisations have entered the arena of coexisting cultures and values. Therefore, in this age, conceiving Western “modernity” as the only royal road to human emancipation, prosperity and freedom is not only Eurocentric, but also misleading and anachronistic. This is, then, to suggest that the debate about Turkey-as-model is heavily saturated with Eurocentric and orientalist assumptions. It is also linked to the Western imperial project that seeks to perpetuate Western hegemony over the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular. In the context of this debate, the better term to employ in place of the “model (Muslim) state”, because of its ideological luggage, could be “exemplary state” which is a more proper description of some Muslim countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, Iran and Indonesia.

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