

Politics and Gender Identity in Turkey: Centralised Islam for Socio-Economic Control. By Umut Korkut and Hande Eslen-Ziya. London and New York: Routledge, 2018, 140pp, £84.

In contemporary Turkey, religion or religious orientation is one of the main streams of political identity. Contrary to Western examples of Christian Democrats, there have been no political parties called Muslim Democrats or Muslim Republicans in recent Turkish history. Such movements had roots, to some extent, in other Middle Eastern countries with whom Turkey has historic and religious ties. Having said that, this does not necessarily suggest there will not be such a party in the future. One reason for lacking such a movement could be due to the fundamentals of the Turkish state itself and most notably the secularism, or *laiklik*, to use the Turkish translation of the word.

Since its foundation in 1923, the Republic of Turkey wanted to keep the state away from religious elements. The republic established a 'westernised' elite. The state became the sole regulator over any organisations or activities, including the conduct of religious ones. The relationship between the religion and the state has generally been overlooked, despite its determining effect in shaping Turkish nation. Umut Korkut and Hande Eslen-Ziya's work brings our attention to this relationship by mainly focusing on the context of *hutbe* (read: sermon) delivered during the Friday noon prayers, which many Muslim men regularly attend in Turkey.

A large body of academic research on Turkey takes religion into consideration when it comes to the pillars of the Turkish state. The power of the state over religious affairs and the tension it generates are not new, but usually enforced or accepted 'as it is'. The central argument of Korkut and Eslen-Ziya's recent research is that the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) government used state power not to suppress religion, but to control and transform religion to "organise the polity and the society along its own ideological tenets" (p. 1). This is a bold argument which puts pressure on the researchers to convince the reader that is the case.

Yet, studying the relationship between the Turkish state and religion would be too broad to analyse. Korkut and Eslen-Ziya overcome this issue by narrowing the focus down to Friday sermons delivered during noon prayers. The primary data is collected between 2011 and 2013 through recording *hutbes* in ten cities over a period of 23 weeks. Among 320 texts, the researchers identified 97 of them to be related to gender and family issues. As another dimension, the researchers surveyed 967 men attending Friday prayers.

Among these men, 18 were selected for in-depth interviews in 2012. Following these phases, the researchers interviewed various Diyanet personnel in 2012 and 2013. The main questions of the research are as following: “‘what type of issues are mentioned in the Friday prayers?’, ‘how do sermons convey gender roles?’, ‘how do sermons construct femininity and masculinity as supportive roles of family?’ as well as ‘how do the pious in attendance comprehend the message in Friday sermons?’” (p. 18).

The book has five core chapters. The first chapter is devoted to contextualising neoliberal governmentality and the role of gender. While acknowledging the state’s control over religious activity since the early republican era, the researcher argue that after the 1980 coup, religion became a source in shaping national identity. In line with that trend, and by the early 2000s, there has been a dramatic increase in the role of *Diyanet Isleri Başkanlığı* (Presidency of Religious Affairs), the government agency responsible for religious affairs. Accordingly, Diyanet has a “higher budget than some ministries including the Internal Affairs, Health, Development, and Foreign Affairs” (p. 32). It has become one of the main service suppliers to other ministries in addition to “supporting and legitimising” AKP actions and discourse (p. 32).

The second chapter is more theoretical than discursive, where the authors explain their rationale to use *hutbes* and methodological approach. This chapter not only discusses the preparation process of *hutbes*, but traces sermon texts from the 1980s and 1990s. The researchers point out that Diyanet plays a central role “in the preparation of *hutbes* not only with the *hutbe* commission, but also via its provincial offices” (p. 39). The texts from the late twentieth century cover a broad range of topics including civil defence, the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and paying taxes. Notably, these texts are a clear indication of how authorities in Ankara employed sermons to brief the masses on politico-economic matters, as well as on family and religious matters. On the effectiveness of sermons on the audience, the researchers concluded from the survey results that “*hutbes* can operate as discursive means and can affect the views of listeners, among many, on issues that relate to family life” (p. 42).

The third chapter is where the researchers find the first breakthrough to position *hutbes* in understanding identity patterns, responsibilities and rights of both men and women within Turkish society. The chapter examines the main slogans that appeared systematically in *hutbe* discourse. In addition to providing a list of slogans and connotations, the researchers argue that “the gender responsibilities appear as pro-family in *hutbes*, but against gender equality. They demand moral and obedient women (read: wives) and authoritarian and controlling men (read: husbands)” (p. 57-58). The *hutbe*

discourse is not limited to adults, as Korkut and Eslen-Ziya also highlight that “the value of children and youth is highly economised for the society” (p.67) by underlining importance of the next generation’s role in the continuation of development.

The fourth chapter centres on the institutions of Diyanet and, most notably, on the Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Bürosu (AIRB, Family Guidance Bureaus). Established in 2002, Family Guidance Bureaus rapidly expanded their scope of service to outsource the ones provided by secular state organisations. Despite offering services to both men and women, it is mainly women who seek advice from the Bureaus. The following argument is a clear demonstration of how the Bureau positions women within society: “Even when it comes to measures that AIRBs introduced to encourage female entrepreneurship, developing the income earning-potential of women does not encourage them to seek employment outside their homes” (p. 84). The chapter also discusses some sermon discourses projecting an ‘ideal family’ and how men and women should behave within that family.

The last empirical chapter, the fifth, reverses the focus and analyses views of imams (preachers) and men attending the Friday noon prayer. This chapter is notable in understanding how the audience react to the message delivered by or implied in *hutbes*. The researchers conduct interviews in three cities and ask the participants their opinions about issues like drinking alcohol, abortion and gender roles. What is revealed here is that if men disagree with the message of *hutbe*, they criticise the imam rather than the institution preparing these texts (i.e. Diyanet).

Overall, the research probes a relatively overlooked subject of the relationship between the state and religion in Turkey. The book would be ideal for those who want to learn more about the rise of Islamic discourse in 21st century Turkey.

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