Turkey's Great Leap Forward:
Atatürk's Reforms and the Rise of Political Islam

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Abstract

The Turkish War of Independence and the following reforms implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were watershed events in both Islamic and world history. The political and social climate of Turkey, previously the Ottoman Empire, had long reflected the complex relationships between the Muslim and Western worlds, especially the power struggle between politics and religion. When Atatürk initiated a revolution in the country in 1919, politics, culture, and religion were dramatically and irrevocably changed. However, while the reforms themselves were swift, the philosophical and ideological development behind them was not. Religion and state in the Muslim world have evolved in tandem since Islam's inception, and this relationship took a new turn with the rise of modern political Islam in the nineteenth century. The goal of this paper is to show that, when considered from the broader perspective of Islamic history, Atatürk's creation and secularization of the Republic of Turkey represented the culmination of political Islam and fulfilled the goals of the movement's leaders, Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abduh.

The Historical and Theological Foundations of Political Islam

While modern political Islam did not arise until the nineteenth century, its goals, achieved in Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, were a continuation of Islamic theology and history dating back more than a millennium earlier. It is important to note that any generalizations about Islam, as with any religion, are difficult to make without falsely characterizing some branch or movement. The debate over what denotes "true" Islam remains vehement to this day, and the complexity of the question is matched only by the profoundness of the impact that the answers will have on world affairs.[1][2] Nevertheless, a definition of political Islam can still be established: at its most fundamental level, political Islam (or Islamism) is an ideology advocating the extension of Islamic theology and tradition into the political sphere.[3] This overlap between religion and state is best summarized in the term *din wa dawla*, which stipulates that Islam apply not only in the mosque (*din*) but also in the polity (*dawla*).[4]

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[1] Manal Omar, "Islam Is a Religion of Peace," *Foreign Policy* (2015), accessed December 31, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/09/islam-is-a-religion-of-peace-manal-omar-debate-islamic-state/.

[2] Ayaan Hirsi Ali, "Islam Is a Religion of Violence," *Foreign Policy* (2015), accessed December 31, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/09/islam-is-a-religion-of-violence-ayaan-hirsi-ali-debate-islamic-state/.

[3] Charles Hirschkind, "What Is Political Islam," *Middle East Report* 27, no. 205 (1997).

[4] Charles Tripp, "All (Muslim) Politics is Local," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2009): 124-129.

Related to, but distinct from, political Islam is Islamic modernism, a movement attempting to synthesize Islam and Western values such as democracy, nationalism, individual freedom, and rational and scientific inquiry.[5] Both movements developed in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of an existential crisis in the Muslim world brought about by imperialism and the seemingly insurmountable political and economic might of the West.[6] However, while Islamic modernism arose as a response to Western civilization's transition to modernity, political Islam's roots are far older. Given the unavoidable interaction between politics and culture in any civilization, one movement cannot be considered without the other, especially in the case of Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, and so this paper will consider both while emphasizing the explicitly political development of Islam in the nineteenth century.

Central to the relationship between religion and state is Sharia, or Islamic law, a moral system developed to guide every aspect of a Muslim's life. However, the interplay of faith and politics long predates Sharia, which did not develop until centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632. It started with the founder of Islam himself Muhammad was both a religious and political leader—in the words of the title of W. Montgomery Watt's biography, both "prophet and statesman."[7] As the transcriber of the word of God, he led the community in prayer; as Qa'id, a title given to a Muslim war leader, he directed the community in battle; and as chief judge, he laid the foundations of Islamic law.[8]

However, while Muhammad was able to maintain both divine and temporal authority, his successors were not. By the time the Muslim world was vast enough to be considered an empire, authority had become more cleanly divided along religious and political lines.[9] "Men of the pen" addressed judiciary and administrative issues, the complexity of which grew with the empire. This group included the Ulama—the "learned ones," a new class of religious clerics and theological scholars who would heavily influence the development of Sharia—and the caliph—"the Successor to the Messenger of God," a position partially inheriting Muhammad's political but none of his prophetic powers—as well as many bureaucrats.[10] "Men of the sword" oversaw military operations, including defense and political matters concerning the expansion of the empire. Despite a developing delineation between religion and state, however, Islam always remained central to society as a whole, such that "The notion of a non-religious society as something desirable or even permissible was totally alien to Islam."[11]

[5] Charles Kurzman, "Introduction: The Modernist Islamic Movement," in *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Source-Book*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[6] Toni Johnson and Mohammed Aly Sergie, "Islam: Governing Under Sharia," (2014), accessed June 15, 2015, http://www.cfr.org/religion/islam-governing-under-sharia/p8034.
[7] *Muhammad: Prophet and Messenger,* London: Oxford University Press, 1961.
[8] Reza Aslan, "The City of the Prophet: The First Muslims," in *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, 113 (New York: Random House, 2005).
[9] Deepa Kumar, "Political Islam: A Marxist Analysis," *International Socialist Review*, no. 76 (2011).
[10] Aslan, *No God but God,* 113-114.
[11] Bernard Lewis, "Secularism and the Civil Society," in *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

The rich history of Islam's relationship to, and sometimes absorption of, the state had evolved dramatically by the nineteenth century. With the rise of European imperialism, the symbiotic relationship between East and West had transformed into parasitism, contributing to a state of political and religious ferment in the Muslim world. Out of this agitation came two figures whose actions and thought would shape modern political Islam: Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abduh. As both the products and causes of the political and religious upheaval in the Middle East, al-Afghani and Abduh would lay the intellectual groundwork for the Turkish War of Independence and, subsequently, the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and Atatürk's revolutionary reforms.

Al-Afghani, "the Awakener of the East," is generally considered the founding father of Islamic modernism and pan-Islamism. He was born in 1838 in an unknown location, although he is believed to have been Persian, and his lifelong travels took him to places as diverse as India, Egypt, Paris, and London.[12] Perhaps the most important result of his odyssey was his realization of the degree to which the Middle East had fallen victim to European, and especially British, imperialism. Al-Afghani witnessed both the breadth and depth of the subjugation of the Muslim world and developed an implacable hatred for the European imperialists that proved to be one of the few views he maintained consistently throughout his life.[13]

Many components of al-Afghani's philosophy would prove highly influential to political Islam in Turkey. First, and perhaps most importantly, he saw Islam as a sociopolitical tool, rather than as simply religious dogma. Al-Afghani had little interest in the divine—he was not a practicing Muslim and has even been suspected of atheism—but he understood that appeals to the divine had an unrivaled ability to mobilize disparate peoples. Despite wide geographic variations in theology and history, Islam had so thoroughly pervaded Middle Eastern civilization that it nevertheless provided a common unifying experience, the political potential of which had only to be actualized. Only by doing so, al-Afghani would come to insist, could the coalition of cultures, ethnicities, and ideologies necessary to defeat the West be assembled.

Al-Afghani's advocacy of pan-Islamism, a movement uniting all Muslim nations in opposition to the West, stemmed from a deep-rooted pragmatism. He maintained little consistency in his solutions to the problem of Muslim enslavement. When not advocating pan-Islamism, he called for nationalism; he criticized Islam's inherent faults but also hearkened back to the religion's golden age; he saw Muslims' unity as the solution to their problems but also called for cooperation with Christians and Jews.[14] He variably endorsed pan-Islamism simply because it worked, and he rejected it when it did not. Al-Afghani was willing to advocate whatever policy or belief could best effect his goal: a vengeful response to the West.

The second noteworthy facet of al-Afghani's philosophy was his open-minded approach towards much of Western civilization. He was ardently opposed to the West, but not to the tools at the West's disposal. Al-Afghani identified Europe's advantages—a

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[12] Aslan, *No God but God,* 229.
[13] Ibrahim Kalin, "Jamal Ad-Din Al-Afghani," Center for Islamic Studies (2007), accessed June 16, 2015, http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/a/afghni.htm.
[14] Pankaj Mishra, "In a Golden Cage: Al-Afghani's Last Days in Istanbul," in *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York: Picador, 2013), 113-119.

commitment to science and technology, a superior education system, and military prowess—and called for Muslims to adopt them.[15] He believed that the best way to defeat the imperialists would be to use their own weapons against them. Even while denouncing Rousseau, Voltaire, and the ancient Greek philosophers, he was willing to acknowledge their accomplishments and admit that the Muslim world had much to learn from them.[16] Such reforms were not heretical in his mind. To al-Afghani, an updated interpretation of the Koran revealed a perfect reconcilability between Islam and science. Once again his pragmatism is apparent: no strategy was off-limits, even one used by the enemy.

Finally, as willing as al-Afghani was to recognize the accomplishments of his opponents, he was just as willing to concede the failures of his own people. He showed a great frustration with the Muslim world; in fact, his anger at what he saw as Muslims' self-destruction was perhaps the only belief he maintained as consistently as his opposition to the West. His attitude toward Muslims' plight was succinctly captured in an oft-quoted passage from the Koran: "God does not change the state of a people until they change themselves."[17] He was always eager to disparage the West, but he nevertheless acknowledged that Muslims had brought many troubles upon themselves. When many Muslims were wondering whether their decline as a civilization was the result of falling away from "true" Islam and were calling for a return to devout orthodoxy, al-Afghani often seems to have thought the opposite – that religion was only holding the Muslim world back from success, and that distancing oneself from Islam was the key to victory. Al-Afghani's political pragmatism, piecemeal admiration for European civilization, and disdain for his own people's attachment to religion would all prove integral to events in Turkey in the following century.[18]

The second essential figure in political Islam, Muhammad Abduh, was a disciple of al-Afghani. While he continued many of his mentor's ideas, he nevertheless provided a distinct voice in the continuing debate over Islam and modernity. Born in Egypt in 1849, Abduh met al-Afghani early in his life and was inspired to reform the Muslim world by proving the compatibility of Islam and modernity. Like al-Afghani, Abduh identified many problems with Islam as it was widely understood and practiced and connected these theological misinterpretations to the current plight of the Muslim world. Also like al-Afghani, Abduh recognized the role that the West had played in the collapse of Islamic civilization: addressing the English, he wrote, "Your liberalness we see plainly is only for yourselves, and your sympathy with us is that of the wolf for the lamb which he designs to eat."[19]

While al-Afghani called for mobilization and revenge against the West, however, Abduh adopted a more introspective approach to Islam. He was less concerned with addressing Europe's contribution to Islam's decline than he was with correcting Muslims' own crippling behavior.[20] Europeans could not be blamed entirely for Muslims' transformation into sheep, geopolitically, intellectually, or spiritually. While his writings

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Come Carpentier De Gourdon, "A History of Political Islam," World Public Forum–Dialogue of Civilizations, December 30, 2013, accessed June 18, 2015, http://wpfdc.org/blog/society/18971-a-history-of-political-islam.

[17] Nikki R. Keddie, comp., *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn "Al-Afghānī* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 173.

[18] Mishra, "In a Golden Cage: Al-Afghani's Last Days in Istanbul," in *From the Ruins of Empire,* 113-119

[19] Aslan, *No God but God,* 232.

[20] Elma Harder, "Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905)," Center for Islamic Studies, accessed June 18, 2016, http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/a/abduh.htm.

were less directly political than al-Afghani's, Abduh nevertheless argued that "There is no religion without a state and no state without authority," suggesting a belief that the government had a role to play in the practice of faith.[21]

Abduh considered the primary problem in the Muslim world to be not Western domination but *taqlid*, an unquestioning adherence to tradition. Blind historicism and the rejection of critical thought, according to Abduh, had contributed to a mental stagnation that was the very opposite mentality of what Islam was meant to advocate. Europe could not be blamed for this intellectual demise; the primary culprits were Islam's own Ulama, the clerics and religious academics who, from the luxury of their ivory minarets, had long enjoyed a practical monopoly on the interpretation and application of the Koran and Sharia.[22] The Ulama's arrogation of spiritual authority had produced an inbred elite, whose archaic doctrines were the principal impediment to the flourishing of Muslim civilization.

The solution, insisted Abduh, was a return to *ijtihad,* independent reasoning on the part of the entire Muslim community.[23] In a mark of his openness to certain aspects of Western civilization, Abduh constantly called for a rational, scientific approach to Islam, writing, "The Qur'an directs us, enjoining rational procedure and intellectual enquiry into the manifestations of the universe." [24][25] Abduh's Koranic exegesis eliminated any perceived discrepancies between science and faith. For example, jinns, mystical spirits mentioned in the Koran, are actually microbes, and evolution proves that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets, or God's last messenger.[26] A critical interpretation of Islamic history and scripture similarly united traditional Islamic concepts and modern Western values. For example, *bay'ah*, an oath of allegiance given by prominent tribal figures to the tribe's leader, becomes universal suffrage, and *shura*, the practice of tribal consultation on matters affecting an entire community, becomes representative democracy.[27][28][29] Abduh's conviction that one need not compromise Islam to accept modernity and that an embrace of science and reason was the key to the Muslim world's resurgence would only grow in importance as Turkey lurched toward modernity.

Atatürk's Reforms

The frustration of al-Afghani and Abduh at their own people's crippling mentalities, the Muslim world's anger at its regression as a civilization, and the debate over the compatibility of modernism and Islam all culminated in 1922, when Mustafa Kemal began a series of reforms that would have huge consequences for Turkey and Islam. Following World War I, the Ottoman Empire was occupied by French, Greek, and British forces, and its decrepit government and economy had earned it the nickname the

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Aslan, *No God but God,* 232.

[23] Harder, "Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905)."

[24] Ibid.

[25] "Islamic Modernism: Responses to Western Modernization in the Middle East."

[26] Ahmad Shafaat, "Muhammad: The Last of the Prophets," The Modern Religion (2000), accessed June 18, 2016, http://www.themodernreligion.com/prophet/prophet_last-shafaat.html.

[27] "Bayah, "Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed December 29, 2015, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e316.

[28] Mugtedar Khan, "Shura and Democracy," Ijtihad, January 12, 2014, accessed December 31, 2015, http://www.ijtihad.org/shura.htm.

[29] Aslan, *No God but God*, 232.

"Sick Man of Europe."[30] Mustafa Kemal, a hero for his actions at Galipoli during the war, led the military in the Turkish War for Independence, successfully cast out the European occupants, and established the Republic of Turkey.[31]

Kemal was soon elected president, was named Atatürk, or "Father of the Turks," and immediately set out to transform and update Turkey for the twentieth century. Perhaps his most significant reform was the abolition of the caliphate. Upon eliminating his only real competition for power and political influence in Turkey, Atatürk was able to continue with a string of reforms weakening Islam and bringing the country closer to the West, including banning the traditional Muslim turban, hijab, and fez; transitioning from a calendar based on the *hijrah* (Muhammad's journey to Mecca) to one based on the birth of Jesus; and replacing the Arabic alphabet with the Latin one. Informing Atatürk's revolution were six principles, or arrows: nationalism, revolutionism, populism, statism, secularism, and republicanism. Collectively, they constituted the ideology that came to be known as Kemalism. By the time Atatürk's reforms had been fully implemented, Turkey had undergone an incredible transformation. Patriotism had replaced piety as the source of national unity, and modernity and progress had replaced history and tradition as the sacrosanct ideals to be invoked.

Ostensibly, Atatürk's reforms marked a complete rejection of political Islam. The latter calls for incorporating religion into politics, while the former strove for their total separation. Atatürk was always suspicious of faith, denying the absolute truth of religion in favor of reason and even going so far as to say, "I have no religion, and at times I wish all religions at the bottom of the sea…Superstition must go."[32][33] On the surface Kemalism appears to be both a complete reversal of al-Afghani's and Abduh's ambitions for the Muslim world and a rejection of a much greater religious heritage; Sharia is the last concept that would belong to Kemalism. Rather than discarding political Islam and its founders, however, Atatürk in fact fulfilled their intentions, both politically and culturally.

World War I had put the already politically and economically feeble Ottoman Empire, the "Sick Man of Europe," on its deathbed. Kemalism and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey allowed for a huge rebound, one that nothing suggests would have been possible without the drastic changes Atatürk initiated. He understood that the creation of a modern nation-state was only the first step in a dramatic return to the world stage: "No matter how mighty they are, political and military victories cannot endure unless they are crowned by economic triumphs."[34] A bold economic plan, marked by rapid industrialization; extensive infrastructural investment; and the development of the private business sector, in conjunction with a system of public enterprises called State Economic Enterprises (SEEs); set Turkey on the path towards economic prosperity from which the Ottoman Empire had so far strayed.[35]

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[30] Cengiz Candar, "No Longer 'Sick Man,' Turkey Is Lonely, Tired," Al-Monitor, July 19, 2013, accessed January 5, 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/turkey-still-sick-man.html#.

[31] Firas Alkhateeb, "How Atatürk Made Turkey Secular," Lost Islamic History, June 11, 2013, accessed June 18, 2016, http://lostislamichistory.com/how-ataturk-made-turkey-secular/.

[32] Mete Tunçay, "Kemalism," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed January 6, 2016, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0440.

[33] "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk," New World Encyclopedia, accessed January 6, 2016, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mustafa_Kemal_Atatürk.

[34] Ebru Hisamoglu, "The Time of the Recovery (1923-1929)," in *Turkish Economic Development in Comparative Perspective* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008), 86.

[35] Morris Singer, "Atatürk's Economic Legacy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 3 (1983): 301-11.

This great leap forward was exactly what al-Afghani was constantly striving for, though he addressed the entire Muslim world, not solely the Ottoman Empire. He longed for the Middle East to return to power, and Atatürk's political and economic policies helped Turkey to do so.

Atatürk was a pragmatist, like al-Afghani, and would espouse any doctrine that might elevate the Turks. The preference for tangible results over ideological consistency resulted in bizarre vacillations on the role of Islam in Turkey. Like al-Afghani, Atatürk originally saw Islam as the ideal sociopolitical tool for unification. For a time, the Turkish Constitution made Islam the state religion and stipulated that all laws would be reviewed by a panel of scholars on Islamic law to ensure compatibility with Sharia. Only two years later, Atatürk reversed course and eliminated the panel upon deciding that religion had become a burden to the state rather than an aid.[36] Al-Afghani had at times similarly dismissed Islam's sociopolitical value in favor of nationalism, depending on the practical needs of the moment.

Inheriting al-Afghani and Abduh's insights, Atatürk saw that a renewal of the supremacy of Middle Eastern civilization could not be achieved simply by defeating the West militarily or economically. The ideological opponents whose defeat was most critical to Turkey's success were domestic, not international. If he were to reverse the intellectual senescence brought about by *taqlid,* the Ulama's unthinking traditionalism that Abduh had so harshly criticized, Atatürk would have to neuter the religious elite in Turkey. He bureaucratized religion, creating "directorates" to control the mosques and requiring government oversight in the selection and appointment of imams. As Perry Anderson states, "Religion was never detached from the nation, becoming instead an unspoken definition of it." [37] Advocates of political Islam called for a religious government; Atatürk created a governmentalized religion. Such reforms recognized the value of both Abduh's indictment of Muslims' intellectual devolution into sheep and the Koran's warning, so often invoked by al-Afghani, that change would occur only if people changed themselves.

Atatürk despised religion and was possibly an atheist himself, but he knew could never eliminate Islam completely; it was too central to the Turkish identity. The best he could do was to adopt Western values selectively, as al-Afghani and Abduh had done, and incorporate them into a modern interpretation of Islam. In a speech given at the Bahkathir Pasha Mosque, Atatürk stated, "Our religion which has poured down favor and spirit to human beings is the last and the most perfect religion; because its principles go in complete line with reason, logic and reality."[38] The sincerity of these words is dubious. Nevertheless, Atatürk understood that a Middle Eastern geopolitical resurgence required capitalizing on Western values to reinvent Islamic society. As the principles of Kemalism (nationalism, revolutionism, populism, statism, secularism, and republicanism) make clear, Atatürk, like both al-Afghani and Abduh, recognized the many benefits that Westernization could bring to the Middle East. Rationality, science, and skepticism were to be embraced, rather than feared, and political and economic success could not be achieved through orthodoxy and cultural quarantine.

Atatürk's intentions were ostensibly the opposite of devout Islamists': he wanted to curb Islam's influence as much as possible because he believed that Islam was

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[36] Firas Alkhateeb, "How Atatürk Made Turkey Secular."
[37] Perry Anderson, "Kemalism," *London Review of Books* 30, no. 17 (2008): 3-12.
[38] Ethem Ruhi Fiğlali, "Atatürk and The Religion of Islam," Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, accessed January 7, 2016, http://www.atam.gov.tr/dergi/sayi-26/ataturk-and-the-religion-of-islam.

destroying Turkey, while Islamists wanted to increase their religion's influence because only by doing so could their civilization return to greatness. But al-Afghani wanted above all else a renewal of the Muslim world's geopolitical power—with the aid of Islam or without—and Abduh strove for an Islamic Enlightenment uniting Muslim and Western civilization, and with the Republic of Turkey, these are exactly what Atatürk achieved.

The Future of Turkey

Through his policies of modernization and secularization in the new Republic of Turkey, Atatürk achieved the goals of political Islam, as delineated by al-Afghani and Abduh. Despite the significance of Atatürk's reforms, they were but one event in the rich history of Islam. Religion and state in the Middle East have covered the entire spectrum of relationships, from Manichaeism to practical interchangeability, and the developments of modernity and political Islam have done nothing to settle the debate over the proper role of one in the other. Nearly a century after Atatürk's reforms began, Turkish politics make clear that the country is still evolving, and Islam along with it. The efforts of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party to instill Islamic principles in Turkish law are simply the latest iteration in the effort to determine Islam's proper place in government, and vice versa.[39] Were they alive today, neither Jamal al-din al-Afghani, nor Mohammad Abduh, nor perhaps even the Prophet Muhammad himself could anticipate what will come next.

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[39] Ömer Taşpınar, "Islamist Politics in Turkey: The New Model?," The Brookings Institution, April 25, 2012, accessed June 19, 2016, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/04/24-turkey-new-model-taspinar.

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