
Arab Atatürk

The weight of History

François Zabbal

January 2014



**Contemporary Turkey
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ISBN : 978-2-86592-875-0
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¹ Translator's note: This is an English translation of the French translation (*La Constitution du Livre arabe au II^{ème} siècle de l'hégire*) of the original Arabic title of the book.

² Translator's note: This is an English translation of the original French title of the book (*Histoire de l'Andalousie. Mémoire et enjeux*).

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Overview

Recent discussion surrounding a "Turkish model" for the Arab world has centred mainly on the achievements of the AKP in Turkey and its supposed ideological proximity to the political parties that have arisen from the Muslim Brotherhood movement. However, the tutelary figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk also still contributes to Turkey's image in the region, sometimes prompting ambiguous reinterpretations of history. Atatürk's legacy remains in several areas, such as nationalism, secularism and democracy, but it is disputed, with references to him serving to highlight the priorities of Arab politicians.

Introduction

Arab countries have not even remotely embraced the Turkish model as a general concept. Those who have seized upon it, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, have used it as a propaganda tool to convince foreign powers of the viability of Islamist rule, rather than as a project for society. In any event, the new appeal of this model has hardly managed to offset the damage done to Turkish-Arab relations in recent decades, with the latter deeply upset by the decision of successive Turkish governments to maintain their old alliance with Israel. Nevertheless, the Turkish model has been part of Arab political discourse for the last decade, provoking contradicting reinterpretations of the Atatürk legacy. These interpretations express, sometimes clearly and sometimes not, the visions of society and politics that the various foreign and native protagonists are keen to defend.

It is therefore not an exaggeration to describe the Arab image of Atatürk as something of a litmus test. It shows the true political colour of those who try to evaluate the measures adopted by the founder of the modern Turkey, as well as the legacy of the man himself. In this sense, in their own way, basic errors, approximations and misunderstandings are the result of a never-ending game of smoke and mirrors.

Several recent developments have led Arab countries to take another look at Atatürk and his achievements. It all started with the 2002 election victory of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) and, above all, the problem that this caused for Turkey's entry to the European Union. Without wishing to go over old ground, blatant pressure from the Americans immediately conferred a degree of respectability and legitimacy to the idea of a "moderate Islamic" government. This term was imposed from the outside; the AKP itself was striving to erase the word "Islamic" from its programme in order to reassure people and retain a conservative image.

So, was the notion of a Turkish model initiated by the United States? As the Arab Spring got under way, the Obama administration was still busy dismantling George W. Bush's policy of trying to impose democracy and human rights in the Middle East. Turkey's role was to facilitate the resolution of regional conflicts. "Even with its popularity on the Arab street rising," write Robert Malley and Peter Harling in an

essay in *Foreign Affairs* from autumn 2010³, "Turkey has yet to achieve a breakthrough on any of the major initiatives on which it has labored." At the same time, however, the US government uses the Turkish model as a defence for its new Middle East policy advocating more tolerance of Islamic political parties. By opening up, first behind closed doors and then publicly⁴, to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after 2005, when the movement won 80 seats in parliamentary elections, Washington made the advent of an Islamic government acceptable on the international stage.

The US and the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in the kind of trick seen all too often in international relations: attempting to convince themselves and the rest of the world that the transition would be smooth and the future would be calm and, above all, prosperous, just like the Turkish economy. And what could be more convincing than using the shining example of the AKP? Well, perhaps one that is not so ambiguous and elusive.

The Turks refused to just take a watching brief amid the reinterpretations of its modern history. They were quick to unlock the door to a better understanding of their past, albeit by giving different keys to different audiences, depending on their expectations. The Turks themselves also have contrasting views of their history, based on their age and political ideology, and yet nationalism is so firmly rooted in their collective conscience that they all paint a positive picture.

If the AKP's victory in Turkey in 2002 prompted conflicting analyses in the West, the start of the Arab Spring nearly a decade later confused the issue even more. By 2011, the Turkish model had gathered momentum, albeit with multiple misunderstandings perpetuated, in particular, by the Islamist parties. In order to keep onside the western powers that retained significant influence in these countries, it was important for the Islamist parties to put on a reassuring face and lead people to believe that the regimes they wished to implement would be in line with the programme of the AKP. The best example of this was in Tunisia, where the leader of the Ennahda party openly embraced comparisons to the AKP. It happened to a lesser extent in Egypt, where the November 2012 visit of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan exposed the gulf between his vision and that of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly on the question of secularism, to which we will return later.

³Robert Malley and Peter Harling, "Beyond Moderates and Militants. How Obama can chart a new course in the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, Sep-Oct 2010, pp. 18-29.

⁴More on the changing attitude of the US can be found in Ben Khabou's "Vers un partenariat entre Washington et les Frères Musulmans?" ["Are We Heading Towards a Partnership Between Washington and the Muslim Brotherhood?"], <http://www.agoravox.fr/actualites/international/article/vers-un-partenariat-entre-94474>.

Atatürk the liberator

Arabs taking inspiration from the AKP have got the wrong end of the stick, according to analyst Akin Ünver⁵, because the Turkish model is not simply about present-day Turkey. He cites the "original Turkish model", which he describes as "secular modernism". The AKP emerged from Kemalism, yet built itself up by opposing this ideology.

In his article, Ünver engages in a fierce anti-Arab attack, going back over all the clichés that have arisen from the Turkish controversy over time. To do this, he engages in directed reading of episodes he has chosen from contemporary history. Ünver links the dependency of the first Arab leaders (the Hashemites) on the United Kingdom to Sharif Hussein of Mecca's Great Arab Revolt, which is said to have given rise to Arab resentment of Turkey. He then takes the Arabs to task for obtaining their post-World War II independence not through struggle but by the consent of the colonial powers whose decline was such that they hastily handed power to illegitimate elites that were liable to protect their interests even in the absence of colonial troops.

In Ünver's eyes, the Arabs failed to match the dignity of truly liberated people such as the Turks, who were guided by "the Turkish republican leadership's obsession with independence and sovereignty." He believes Turkey's present-day independence should not be mentioned without referring to the Kemalist project that formed the basis for it with "its combination of republicanism, nationalism and secular modernization". Other leaders, such as Iran's Reza Shah Pahlavi, attempted to follow Atatürk's lead, but he came up short against the might of the clergy. "Arab secularists", such as the founders of the Baath party⁶, merely copied the programme of the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress⁷, with the addition of

⁵ Akin Ünver, "The Forgotten Secular Turkish Model. Turkey, Past and Future", in *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2013, pp. 57-64. The journal is published by Daniel Pipes.

⁶ The Greek Orthodox Michel Aflaq and the Sunni Salah al-Din al-Bitar.

⁷ The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was an expression of the Young Turks movement, which since 1889 had been demanding the restoration of the constitution suspended by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1878. Founded in 1907, the CUP set up in Macedonia, from where the revolt against the Sultan began. The constitution was restored on 24 July 1908, but struggles against supporters of the Sultan continued until the CUP took power on 23 January 1913 and imposed a triumvirate of Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha and Djemal Pasha. The CUP comprised a broad range of reformists, from liberals to centralists. These included Arabs who would play a key role in the new states of Iraq and Syria.

the word "socialism". Unfortunately for them, and for Nasserism in Egypt, their rise coincided with the Cold War, prompting Arab leaders to abandon neutrality and embrace the Soviet bloc. It should also be stressed that Ünver fails to qualify Turkey's joining of NATO.

On top of this, Ünver describes "the Arabs' obsession with Israel" as leading them to depart from one of the fundamental principles of the "initial Turkish model": rejection of all patronage and tutelage relations with foreign powers. He concludes: "Just as the Arabs had replaced Ottoman colonialism with British imperialism, they now replaced the latter with Soviet military guardianship for the sake of destroying Israel." There endeth Ünver's sermon.

He is wrong, because there is no doubt that it was Atatürk's role as a liberator that had the greatest impact on Arabs during the inter-war years. Just as the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire was being imposed upon the Arabs, the Turks, led by Mustafa Kemal, were standing up to a coalition of foreign powers whose armies had swiftly occupied large swathes of Anatolia. The Turks can simply remember the heroic tale of their leader without having to add the Arabs' capitulation to the French and, worse still, their submission to the British and their colonial designs.

Atatürk the liberator and independence fighter demands respect, however scandalous his anti-religious measures. This is undeniably the case in Algeria, even though they are committed to making the defence of Islam a key factor in the fight for liberation. Atatürk set a very real example to those who, during the same period, were subjected to French colonialism and whose collective conscience was awoken after World War I, particularly due to tributes paid in the WWI battlefields. Their love for Turkey was due not so much to a 300-year Ottoman presence (which was actually fairly limited demographically) as to the symbolic weight of the last great Muslim empire⁸. The independence for which Atatürk fought so hard would make Turkey the only independent Muslim state, and therefore worthy of admiration. When the Allies evacuated Constantinople in 1922, protests took place on the streets of Algiers, where the madrasas displayed portraits of Mustafa Kemal. Although it was the idea of national independence that mainly captivated the Algerians, some people, such as Ferhat Abbas, went further and called on their fellow citizens to "unreservedly adopt western civilisation and no longer look to the East". His words echoed those of Mustafa Kemal, who said in 1924: "The movement of Turks for centuries has kept a steady course. We have always been marching from the East to the West."⁹

Atatürk's abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate did not overly concern the Algerian ulama, who were so far removed from the

⁸ Nahas Mohamed Mahieddine, "The political ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Algerian National Movement", in *Insaniyat*, a journal of anthropology and social sciences, No. 25-26, 2004, pp. 123-142.

⁹ Ibid.

rivalries in the Middle East. Initially, the reformist Abdelhamid Ben Badis even supported Mustafa Kemal against the Pan-Islamic ranks in the East, who were embarking on "futile attacks", while Atatürk's aim was to "modernise Islam rather than eliminate it". However, the introduction of secularism and of measures in favour of women's rights caused outrage in both Algeria and Morocco¹⁰. This was only to be expected given that the assertion of traditions, even the most conservative ones, was part of the fight against French colonialism in North Africa.

Memories of an empire

There are not just misunderstandings between Atatürk and the Arabs; there is also history. The history of an empire, to be precise. Atatürk was the worthy heir to the Ottoman Empire; the Arabs were merely the lost children of its provinces. In other words, the Ottoman leaders divided up what was left of the Empire - unequally. The Young Turks allies of Mustafa Kemal, the Kurdish Bedir Khans, the friends of Sati' al-Husri who dreamed of founding an Arab Prussia in Iraq, and the Armenians and other Ottoman communities were all the last senior officials of the declining empire: educated at the same schools, trained at the same military academies and infused with the same brand of European nationalism. They invented antagonistic Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish identities that needed to be sown into the land and into people's minds. Unfortunately for them and for the people they claimed to lead, the inheritance was not divided up equally.

Turkey (and this is something that is not mentioned enough) inherited institutions on the scale of an empire. On the other hand, the provincial capitals that sent their children to be educated in Constantinople received the smallest share of modernising investments, if any. New organisations were not set up until the end of the 19th century - at best half a century after reforms were initiated in Constantinople¹¹, which benefited continually from state initiatives. Despite the war and its consequences, it was therefore a developed, expanded and diversified political machinery that Mustafa Kemal inherited after World War I - one with the scale of an empire that only recently had extended to the Arabian Peninsula. There was one exception, however: Egypt had been modernising since the start of the 19th century under viceroy Muhammad Ali.

It is therefore no surprise to historians that the Ottoman Empire plays a big part in the Arab view of Atatürk. It has not always been part of the debate on Arab history, however. In fact, it was often hidden or

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These reforms, known as Tanzimat, came in several waves, initially in 1839 and 1856, and were introduced by modernist officials taking a leaf out of Europe's book.

pushed to the back of people's minds. Arab nationalism was born out of rejecting Turkish identity and, more generally, Ottoman Turkish heritage. It imposed a view of history on generations on Arab scholars, who see the centuries of Ottoman rule as nothing more than a period of decadence and tyranny. It is true that less radical views have existed in parts of the Arab world, particularly in countries not directly subjected to the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and his Young Turks successors.

The Arab rediscovery of the Ottoman Empire is related to different interpretations of Atatürk's personality and legacy. However, this is more than just a re-examination of early-20th-century history; it is the direct effect of the weakening of the nation states born out of World War I. On the back of Iraq and its irreconcilable components (Kurds, Sunnis and Shias), the war in Syria threatens the very foundations of the nation state constructed so painfully by the French. It should be stressed that the Ottoman era has been revisited before. In the 1970s, Arab historical researchers attempted to restore the reputation of the centuries of Ottoman rule and of the Ottomans themselves, who were credited with all the virtues of good government, including respect for minorities. Today, however, historians insist on looking at the imperial dimension of the Ottomans, a long-overlooked subject that world history is rediscovering, as shown by several recent publications¹². This is no easy task: although the economic, political and military aspects are well documented, many machinations of the empire remain an enigma, particularly how it earned the allegiance of its subjects, regardless of religion and ethnicity.

It should be noted that interest in the Ottoman Empire now goes beyond historians. The Arab press is discovering that a proper history of Arab countries cannot be produced without delving into the Turkish archives. Of the 250 million documents making up these archives, some 100 million are on Arab countries alone, of which only 50,000 are thought to have been translated to date. Archivist Kamal Khodja¹³ believes the fault lies with the Arab countries for not showing enough interest in these documents and with a lack of Ottoman-to-Arabic translators, which handicaps both Turkish and Arab historiography. The attitude of the Turkish authorities, which ranges from outright withholding of information to putting more bureaucratic hurdles in the path of foreign researchers, has been overlooked.

The Muslim Brotherhood believes that condemnation of Kemalism comes from a positive view not so much of the years of Ottoman rule as of the Caliphate, the political and religious institution associated with that period. This is an important distinction to make because it shows that loyalty to the Caliphate can be separate from an

¹² This book, for example, has enjoyed success largely because of the novelty of the subject matter: Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2011

¹³ Interview by Manal Lotfi, "Arab History in the Ottoman Archives", in *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 11/11/2007.

overall opinion on the history of the Ottoman Empire. Supporting the Caliphate conforms to an orthodox theological and political position that obliges submission to the head of the Muslim community, even if he is unjust. In this sense, the politics of the Ottoman Sultans throughout the centuries matters little, provided they defended Islam inside and outside the empire.

From this point of view, Atatürk committed the unforgivable offence of abolishing both the Caliphate and the Sultanate, the two being linked. As one can see, the weight and reality of history is less important than the incarnation of an Islamic state in a leader, a sultan or an imam as it might be understood by political theologians from the Middle Ages. Historians believe that the empire itself does not really exist in Islamic discourse and is inaccurately defined elsewhere. One good example is the tricky and sporadic use of the transliterated Arabic word *imbaratûriya*, meaning "empire"; while *dawla* is used to designate a nation state that has adopted Western institutions and laws. But for centuries, this word has meant an apparatus of power in its strictest sense, with no reference to a territory or a people, but linked to a dynasty. Contemporary Arabic writing dictates that *dawla uthmâniya* (literally "Ottoman State") be used to describe the Ottoman Empire. So what does this make the entity which Atatürk abolished in 1923 and which was replaced by the Republic of Turkey? Was it a regime or an empire?

Turkish exceptionalism

Surprisingly, the history of Ottoman rule resurfaces in several different ways. First, there are imperial memories in the aspirations of AKP leaders who wish to implement a regional policy that is worthy of present-day Turkey's economic power and strategic influence. Since the break-up of the USSR, Ankara has perpetuated the fantasy of a large Turkish-speaking area stretching as far as central Asia and guaranteeing new political depth for Turkey. The inflammatory statements were closer to fierce early-20th-century Pan-Turanism¹⁴ than the imperial vision of the Ottomans, who were concerned about having to administer such different, 'un-Turkish' territories as the Balkan states and the Arab countries.

In order to better understand present-day Turkey, *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* journalist Manal Lotfi went to see Şerif Mardin, an academic and political commentator whose essays have attracted considerable attention. Born in 1927 and educated at Stanford University, Mardin is considered the doyen of Turkish sociology, and has written many texts on the Ottoman era, including one on the "nature of nation". He told Manal Lotfi that, rather than being invented by Atatürk, Turkish secularism arose from bureaucratic and military circles in the Ottoman Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries, before properly blossoming in the 19th century through the Tanzimat reforms begun in 1839. In truth, Mardin brought nothing new to the old argument about internal crises of the Ottoman system - a question discussed by historians for a long time. Historians had long debated the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the failure of the reforms initiated by the Grand Viziers, such as the Köprülüs at the end of the 17th century, in order to improve military organisation and the tax system. However, Mardin knew that his interpretation would provoke both his compatriots and the Arab audience of the interview.

Kemalist orthodoxy has so strongly imposed the notion of a radical break from the old regime that most Turks will simply not accept trivialising Atatürk's actions by painting them as an extension of Ottoman policies. On the other hand, exonerating the Ottoman Empire could reconcile part of Arab opinion with current Turkish ideology. We are some way from this point, however. Rather than a convergence of views, Mardin reaffirms the void between the Turks and the Arabs by

¹⁴ Pan-Turanism was the form taken by Turkish nationalism before World War I. It concerned the desire to unite all Turanian people from the Danube to Siberia. The term comes from the Persian word *Tūrān*, or "land of the Tur".

speaking of "Turkish exceptionalism", a concept which he admits is inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville's description of American democracy. He believes that the issue is the singular relationship between religion and the state. Just like Tocqueville's unopposed America, present-day Turkey cannot be the result of one cancelling the other out. In the interview, Mardin claims: "The state was more important for the Ottoman rulers than it was in other countries in the region. (...) But it was only fractionally ahead of religion." As a result, supremacy of the state went hand in hand with the persistence of religion. Hence the singular concept of religion founded on the power of the state, which is something that many Arabs struggle to comprehend, Mardin adds, because to them, religion comes before the state. In reality, this has long been the description of Semites' relationship with religion.

No doubt aided by the notoriety of Mardin, the interview is quoted or summarised in English on the internet, along with its conclusion which will doubtless live on through history: "The state comes before religion by one millimetre. (...) Throughout its history, the Ottoman Empire was cautious to distance religion from the state (...) ; [Turkey] was founded on the power of the state, which is a concept that is difficult for many Arabs to understand."¹⁵

When asked "What does the phrase 'Turkish Islam' mean to you?", Mardin said that Turkish Islam was exceptional because it was early in adopting the ideas of the Enlightenment era, benefiting from the ideas circulating around central Europe, particularly Austria, and the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to this, Mardin cites contact between Turks and Christians since ancient times. But was this really something exceptional in light of what happened in the Far East, Egypt and other parts of north Africa? In any event, we should highlight the apparent contradiction in Mardin praising the Ottoman tradition on the one hand, and placing the adoption of European Enlightenment ideas by Ottomans very far back on time. Moreover, his approach is not unique; it simply mirrors the conclusions of most Turkish researchers, who have for some time studied the history of the Ottoman Empire alongside that of Europe, in line with current trends in world history¹⁶.

Turkish nationalism

¹⁵<http://icarusredeemed.blogspot.fr/2007/12/what-is-turkish-exceptionalism.html>;
translation of the text.

¹⁶ One example is Suraiya Faroqi's *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2005.

Turkish Islam will doubtless remain a mystery to the *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* journalist, who goes from one surprise to another. In one way, Şerif Mardin put him on the wrong track by playing down the radical nature of Kemal Atatürk's actions. There is another interpretation of history in Arab countries.

"The Ottoman Empire had actually broken up before Atatürk announced the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic and abolished the Islamic Caliphate having ended the Sultanate", writes Lebanese historian Massoud Daher (*al-Hayat*, London, 27 October 2013). However, Atatürk's reputation remains intact as the great liberator of Turkish land in the face of British, Greek and Russian invaders. Indeed, journalist Manal Lotfi was astonished to discover a real cult when she spoke to ordinary Turks. Atatürk is everywhere, just like the Turkish flags adorning public transport, shops and buildings. He is part of everyday life and everyday conversations: "If Atatürk was around, he would have done this or that..." More specifically: "He would have had Abdullah Öcalan [the head of the radical Kurdistan Workers' Party] executed."

"Kemalism is part of Turkey's collective conscience because of the achievements of Mustafa Kemal from which Turkey continues to benefit", notes Sayyid Abdel-Maguid¹⁷. Mustafa Kemal is believed to have transformed his country into a modern republic in just 15 years. How was that possible? Massoud Daher claims the answer can be found in nationalism. Kemalism, he says, was "a project to build a nation state at a time when European secular nation states were prevalent. In this way, Turkey opted for a secular, republican regime to break from the defeated Ottoman sultanate regime." As a result, with the age of the great empires now over, the new state would be seen as legitimate from the outside only if it was backed by on the more modest and poorer societal classes.

In Arab writing, Atatürk's nationalist policies are embraced as long as they represent hard-fought independence. However, his domestic record remains an enigma. Sometimes, people will denounce him for treating the Kurds more harshly than the Syrians and the Iraqis, but the singular dimension of Turkish identity will rarely be explored. While the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt has nothing against Turkish nationalism, given that their vision of the Islamic Ummah allows for national affiliation, it believes that Mustafa Kemal did not go as far as the members of the Committee of Union and Progress in terms of enthusiasm for Pan-Turanism. In reality, there is no desire to establish the difference between Turkism and Arabism, even though it is acknowledged that Turkism was an essential tool used by Mustafa Kemal to mobilise his people. This is something of a blind spot in the game of smoke and mirrors between Arabs and Turks.

¹⁷ Sayyid Abdel-Maguid, "A lecture on the founder of modern Turkey", *al-Dimuqrati* (al-Ahram group), 1/1/2001.

Have Turkish and Arab leaders not both had to deal with similar situations: foreign occupation, division of their territory and fragmentation of societies? The difference is that although Mustafa Kemal succeeded in completing his bid for liberation and independence, the attempts to build a great Arab entity never got off the ground once King Faisal left Syria in 1920 and was installed as King of Iraq. In order to better understand Turkism, Arab analysts must examine Arab nationalism so they can determine whether it is an ideology of the same kind as Kemalism. While a Turkish nation state was successfully created, the failure to create an Arab nation state resulted in multiple states where it was forbidden to have a sense of identity and belonging other than Pan-Arabism. In other words, Arab utopia failed to take hold in one territory or among one people, but the ideology behind it rendered suspect any local patriotism arising from the creation of nation states in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and elsewhere. The ethnic and denominational division of what would become Turkey was similar to that in the Middle East after World War I, and the joy of a nation state founded on the symbiotic relationship between a people and its leaders was shared equally by Mustafa Kemal and by the advisers of King Faisal of Iraq.

Amir Taheri¹⁸, one of the leading experts in Middle Eastern politics, describes Mustafa Kemal's nationalism as "creative" in that it aimed to awake a national conscience in the Turkey that was born from the embers of the Ottoman Empire. Non-Turks were also expected to fit the national mould that remained united until the 1980s. What emerged was a kind of positive nationalism that was no threat to other countries since, Taheri notes, it never resulted in an expansionist policy. He says: "Turkey has never tried to invade another country and has never engaged in a war against its neighbours, which is remarkable for a country of its size."

Kemalist secularism

Without doubt, Turkish secularism is the subject that has been the focus of attention in Arab countries and beyond. This was also the case in the 1920s and 1930s when Mustafa Kemal was launching his raft of reforms provoking outrage in the Muslim world, particularly abolishing the Caliphate and adopting the Swiss Civil Code and the Latin alphabet. At the same time, these measures prompted a U-turn

¹⁸ Amir Taheri, "What is the Turkish model? ", *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6/11/2011.

in European opinion following a period marked by fear that Kemalism would become a spearhead for a mix of Islamism and Bolshevism. "It was a time when the officers of the Kemalist army wore the red star on the collar of their uniform while claiming the green flag of Islam."¹⁹

Since 1922, the new face of Turkey has been seducing European travellers not short of effusive praise for the boldness of Mustafa Kemal. "Western journalists, observers and politicians would travel to Ankara almost as pilgrims to revel in a reflection of their own culture and vision of a better world." Already, people wanted the Kemalist model to spread throughout the Muslim world, because certain Arab leaders were impressed by the radical change to Turkish society. Amanullah Khan, the King of Afghanistan, and Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, travelled to Ankara to witness first hand the scale of the change and the driving force behind it. However, these two leaders were no longer part of an Arab world where any Kemalist inspiration was rarely on explicit display. The abolition of the Caliphate prompted a lively debate between the ulama and the young author of an iconoclastic revision of the issue of power in Islam: Ali Abdel Raziq (1888-1966) and his *Islam and the Foundations of Governance*²⁰. Mustafa Kemal found disciples for his bold approach to a topic as sensitive as the alphabet. The liberal Egyptian intellectual Abdel-Aziz Fahmi proposed replacing Arabic script with Latin script, just like in Turkey. He was subject to neither anathema nor attack. "When consulted, the Academy of the Arabic Language preferred to say nothing on the matter, although it did decide to print the submitted text and distribute it throughout the Arab world for information purposes."²¹ Would we see such tolerance today? It was a different mentality from a bygone age. There can be no doubt that the idea of reform was in the air.

Nowadays, the image of this secularism could not be more blurred. Those who claim to support the Turkish model are not always defenders of secularisation - indeed, far from it. The Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt led people to believe that they subscribed wholly to the model, and yet their priority was seemingly to impose Sharia law as soon as they came to power. More generally, Arab opinions are not divided along a particular line with the Arab nationalist parties on the same side as the secular Kemalist model. Indeed, these parties have traditionally been as hostile to the Turkish approach as they have to their Islamist adversaries, albeit for different reasons.

In any event, the idea that Turkish secularism is the enemy of religion no longer has much currency, and there are many Arab observers who now acknowledge that the Turkish system advocates strict government control of religious institutions, particularly mosques and churches, rather than separation of religion and state. This draws

¹⁹ Paul Dumont, "Atatürk's Turkey: a development model for the Muslim world", a text for Journées Bruxelloises de la Méditerranée, MEDEA Institute, Brussels, 23 October 2003, pg 5.

²⁰ Parsi, La Découverte, 1994.

²¹ Paul Dumont, *op. cit.*, pg 7.

undeniable comparisons with the policies of several Arab countries during the course of the 20th century. Although not as radical as those of Atatürk, the measures taken by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Habib Bourguiba also aimed to subject religious institution to the national interest. It is clear that Nasser's reforms of Al-Azhar did not deliver all the expected results. However, turning religious leaders into men of the state is a general phenomenon that does not necessarily entail institutional centralisation.

Habib Bourguiba is without doubt the Arab leader who went furthest in his questioning of religious tradition. The Tunisians were quick to compare him to Atatürk, while rejecting any similarity on the issue of secularism. The comparisons between the two leaders do seem somewhat excessive given their radically different approaches. While Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution defines Turkey as a "secular" state, Article 1 of the Tunisian Constitution of 1959 states: "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its type of government is the Republic". Bourguiba was responsible for this Article, in which the use of a possessive ("*its* religion") introduced an ambiguity to the definition of religion which allows for open interpretation and can be used for sociological dominance of Islam in Tunisia.

Since 1928, Turkey has not had to deal with how or to what extent Sharia should be applied, since neither Islam nor Sharia features in any way as a foundation for law²². Contrarily, Anwar Sadat's 1971 introduction of Sharia as a principal source of the Egyptian Constitution, which was amended in 1980 to become *the* source of the country's laws, is clear evidence of the extent to which Mustafa Kemal's approach differed from those of other leaders of the Arab and Muslim world. Having said that, Bourguiba did display comparable audacity in at least one area: the status of women. By introducing equal rights and outlawing polygamy, the Tunisian president provoked an as yet unrivalled split. He still tried to frame his secular measure in some kind of religious context by falling back on *ijtihad*, an Islamic legal term describing the effort made to interpret situations not covered precisely in the Qu'ran.

The comparison with Nasser, who is a great hero in the Arab world, serves as further proof of the changing Arab perception of Atatürk, given the countless things that the Egyptian leader did for religion. During his 18-year reign, he had 10,000 mosques built - as many as had been built in Egypt since the foundation of Islam. His modernisation of Al-Azhar extended the network of institutions throughout Egypt and Africa, including ones open to girls. There were Islamic missions, translations of the Qu'ran and religious programmes²³. As one might expect, the comparison ends here:

²² The 1924 Constitution was amended by Law No. 1222 of 10 April 1928, which removed all provisions containing a reference to religion (Articles 2, 16, 26 and 38)

²³ Umrü Sabeh, "Was Gamal Abdel Nasser the Arab Atatürk? ", in *al-Fikr al-qawmî*, 12/3/2013.

Mustafa Kemal led something of a debauched life, whereas Nasser was a non-womanising teetotaler.

In the eyes of Arabs, Atatürk has remained an enemy of Islam just as he was of Arabs. Moreover, columnists never miss an opportunity to mention one of his declarations about Islam: "an obstacle to development" or "a cancer from the Middle Ages". The only comparable anti-religious sentiment in the Arab world can be found among communists and radical Baathists. During the 1960s, the Baath party in Syria put religious organisations under the auspices of the state, before pulling back under the leadership of Hafez el-Assad and making do with keeping a close eye on these organisations but allowing the spread of private "religious seminaries". Arab leaders were thus largely unaware of Turkey's *Diyanet*, or Presidency of Religious Affairs, many of them believing that religion and the state were completely separate in Turkey.

Modernity, democracy and Islam

The top-down modernisation of societies and institutions was a recurring theme of Arab political culture in the 20th century. In order to impose their reforms, leaders attempted to construct a strong power base, using force where necessary. They were no different to Mustafa Kemal in this respect, but whereas he had free rein from when his country became independent in 1922, modernisation policies were not implemented in Arab countries until the end of World War II. However, the Cold War brought the dawn of a new era.

"Kemalism", notes Paul Dumont, "provided anti-colonial and nationalist forces in the Muslim world with a model that was difficult to replicate since it was so strongly dependent on the specific nature of an Empire that was crumbling but from which some lessons and direction could be taken. " Lessons, yes, but a transposable formula, no: it was the articulation of the different strengths of Kemalism that made it so coherent. What other explanation is there for authoritarianism failing to prevent the sovereignty of law and the independence of justice? Similarly, the secular measures were less important than the clear demarcation of religious boundaries. However vibrant religion was, notes Didier Billion, Turkish society integrated and internalised secularism just as eventually was the case with Christians in western Europe. In such a way, "with the scale of secular reforms having overhauled relations between the private and public sectors, one can be a man of faith and a regular citizen. (...) The question in

Turkey is whether an Islam freed from the control of the state and administered by an independent structure could respect secular principles and refrain from restricting the liberties of people who do not share the same religious beliefs or see themselves as part of said structure. ²⁴

Conclusion

It is unclear whether the Turkish model of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will continue to prove popular in the wake of the problems of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, the so-called disciples of the AKP. Many in the Arab world believe that an alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood, the Gulf Emirates and the Justice and Development Party has the blessing of the CIA. As for the "Islamic democracy" that the AKP has tried to spread, it now seems to have been embraced only by a fringe of Tunisia's Ennahda party. In answer to the question of whether Turkey could still be a model for Egypt and Tunisia, Erdoğan claims that Islamist parties have failed only because they have not learned from Turkey's experience. He neglects, however, to mention whether he is referring to the economy or democracy. In any event, the lesson of Atatürk is not even close to being learned.

²⁴ Didier Billion, "Secularism, political Islam and conservative democracy in Turkey", *Confluences Méditerranée*, 2011/1, no. 76, pp. 39-41.