

Islamic Traditionalism in Turkey: why AKP is not a phenomenon



The So-Called Revival

- 1995 - Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party come to power winning 21.4 percent of the national vote that granted them 158 seats out of the 550 member National Assembly
- Forced out by 'soft-coup' due to threats from the military (brief interlude)
- 2002 – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) came to power with 34.2 percent of the vote (winning 363 seats)
 - 2007 – AKP took 47 percent
 - 2011 – AKP took 50 percent

Shock and Dismay

- Events like this, particularly Refah's success in 1995-7 in the mayoral and national elections unsettled secularists.
- Despite the fact that opinion polls that put the Islamists ahead.
- As Sayari (1996) commented, it “created shockwaves both at home and abroad.”

Reasons behind the shift?

- Many have sought to downplay Islam in explaining the success of Refah and the AKP:
 - unintended consequence in the early 1980s due to the attempted co-option of Islam by the military through the Turkish-Islamic- Synthesis
 - the failure of the centre-right and centre-left parties, in so far that they have been unable to put forward decent economic policies, are perceived as corrupt, thereby creating a vacuum that the religious parties have fortuitously walked into
 - an indigenous petty-bourgeoisie that developed 1980s and 90s disappointed with the lack of government support that had been granted to them during their initial development and wanted to stake a claim to power.

Problem

- The issue with these explanations is that they don't look back far enough.
- They only go back as far as Milli Görüş in the 1970s.

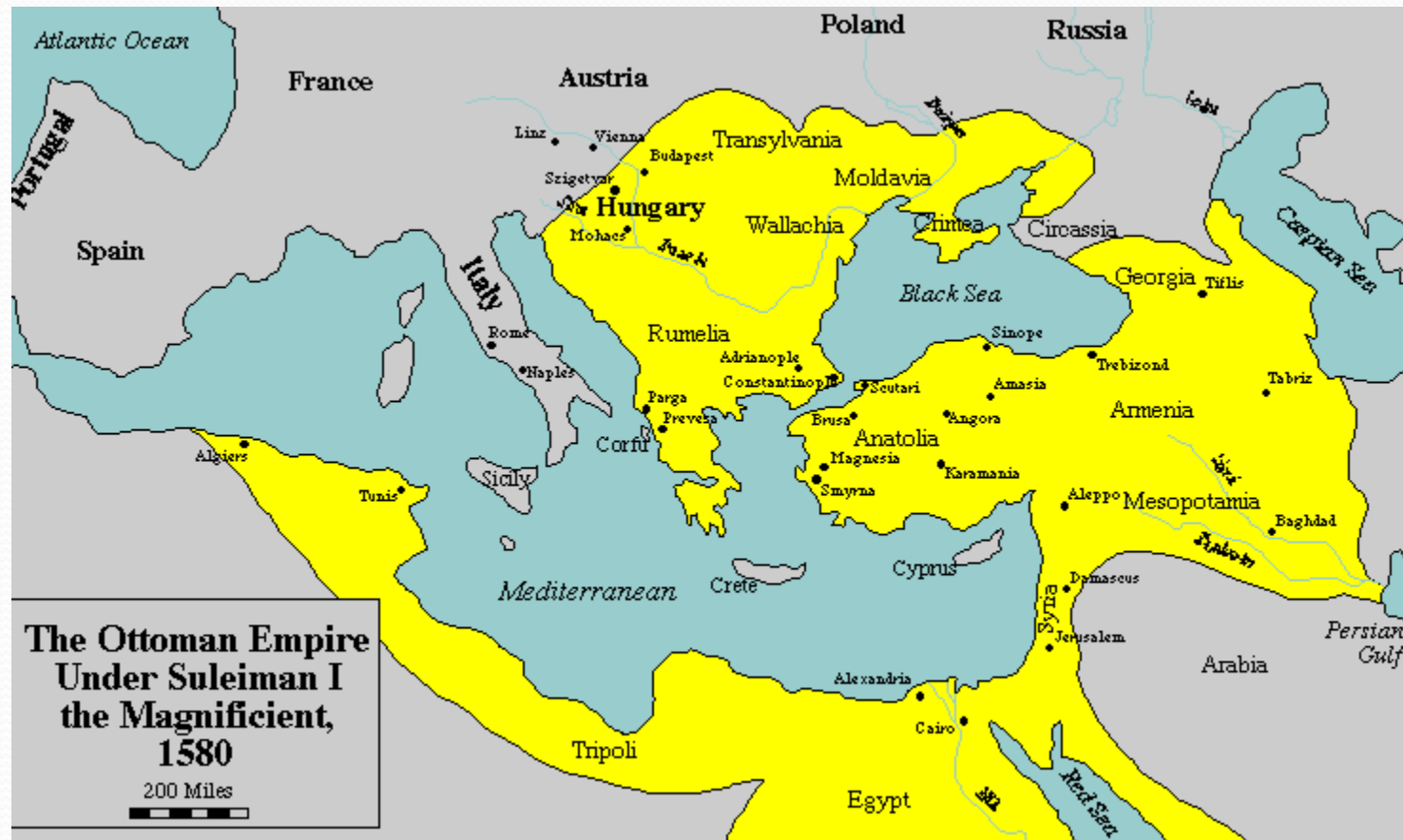
High and Low Islam

- Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406): observed that in Islamic societies that there are two types of Islam:
 - Text based high Islam (dogmatic, juridical)
 - Culturally based Low Islam (folk Islam) which is more symbolic and relational i.e. Weddings, births deaths, festivals. Orally transmitted. Also includes Saint Worship.
- Usually these two are in conflict with High Islam seeking to eradicate its cultural counterpart.

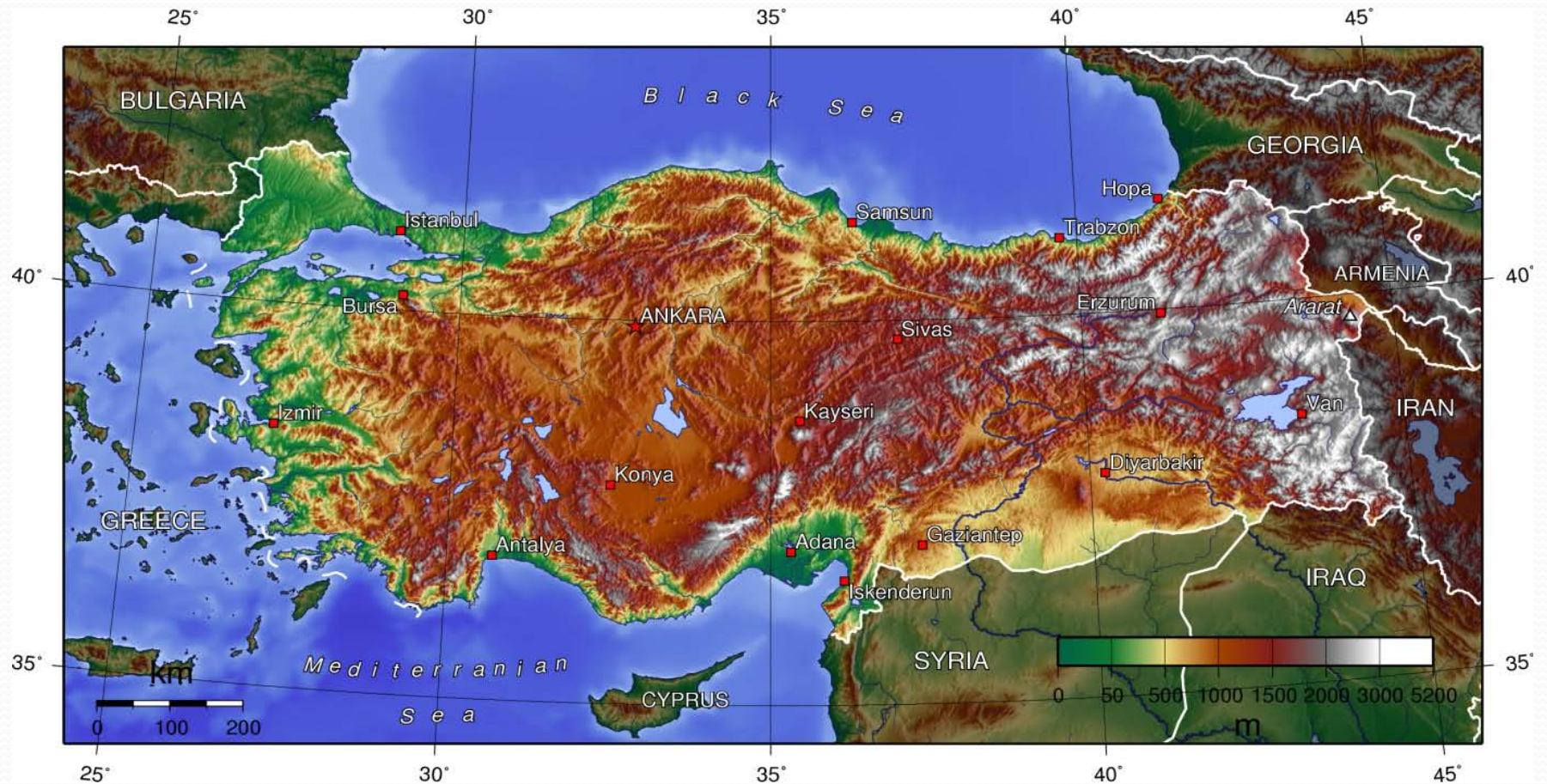
Turkish Cleavage

- This observation holds true for the Ottoman Empire and its successor the Modern Turkish Republic (mostly).
- Key Factor
 - Geography: the ottoman empire was expansive and riddled with difficult terrain

Ottoman Empire – At Apex



Topography of Modern Turkey



Centre-Periphery Split

- Split between High Islam and Low Islam was an outgrowth of this geography.
- The seat of Islamic learning was in the capital Istanbul
 - If one wanted proper scholarly training you had to travel to Istanbul. Not many provincials could do this.
 - Marked difference in the level of education in Urban and rural settings.

Centralisation of Ulema

- By the 17th Century most of the provincial Medreses no longer measured up to employment in the in the Ulema hierarchy.
- As a result of this centralisation, the Empires signature religious posts were filled by 300 individuals who had been trained at the elite schools that operated with the imperial standing.
- As a result of this lack of parity and logistics by the 18th Century provincials had largely stopped pursuing a traditional education in the Capital.
- Similarly, centrally trained Ulema due to the dangers of travel were wary of provincial posting.

The Twist: local religious notables

- Rather than seek to impose High Islam on the provinces and curb local practice, local religious notables - Sufi Şeys, reciters of the Qur'an or the canonical Hadith compilations – who did not qualify as Ulema filled the breach.
- For example the Kadi of Iznik in the 18th century was an ordinary town judge, who graduated from a minor medrese with no more than 6 years training, if that.

Semi-Autonomous Folk Islam

- Low or folk Islam was able to continue to operate relatively free of its juridical counterpart.
- However, there was a trickle down effect that emanated from the centre. But it was not a case of purification of Islam but rather one of consolidation between both High and Low.

Tanzimat Period: 1839-76

- In this period the Ulema were beginning to be decoupled from the apparatus of the state.
 - In 1840 the French criminal code was introduced.
 - Rüşdiye (military colleges and Grand Ecoles were introduced. These secular education institutions which developed another stream of elite that would question Islam.
 - Positivism began to take hold
 - Changed nature of learning – depersonalised and rationalised it. No longer master-student relationship. Displaced traditional personalistic nature of social relations. The basis of Ottoman society both in the centre and periphery.

Culture as Key

- The loss of status of the Ulema as they were slowly but surely displaced moved their attention from politics to culture.
- As Mardin (1989) puts it a 'Kulturkampf' was in the offing.
 - For example ex-Medrese individuals took up the challenge articulate Islam as being superior to Western Culture and that Islam was integral to the Empire.
- This battle filtered out in the provinces and was also taken up by local religious figures. A key figure in this regard was Said Nursi.

Beduizzaman Said Nursi 1877-1960



Hybridization of Islam

- In response to threat of Islam being replaced by Positivism and secular knowledge, Nursi sought to show that they were one and the same.
- Wrote a body of work that called the Risale-i Nur (Epistles of the light), a Qur'anic exegesis which argued this point.
- Became extremely popular amongst the masses and created a new brand of Islam that contained both elements of High and Low culture that appealed to the masses.

Aspects of Hybrid Islam

- Nurcu Movement are text based, work off texts of Nursi but have strict adherence to the Qur'an as the true word of God.
- That said Nursi's work should not be regarded as legalistic. It was intended to help the common man understand Islam. Contains material about the place of Saints and other folk concepts, and the place of master and pupil – basic social relations in society.
- Gather together in groups where a esteemed friend reads from the Risale-i Nur and explains it to the rest of the group – here we can see the oral tradition and master – student relationship that was the hallmark of learning in the Ottoman Empire.

Gülen – Hybrid Islam continued

- Gülen continued the development of this movement which is now boasts around 7 million followers and man more sympathisers.
- Fastest growing religious movement in Turkey.



Questions?