"Islamic Modernist" Mustafa Akyol Betrays More of His Worldview Than He Likely Intended (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Akyol paints a picture of progress, steady but very slow, in encouraging change in Islam. But in fact, there has been backsliding in the very place where a secular Muslim society had been taken the farthest: Kemalist Turkey. Erdogan turns out to be the anti-Ataturk, he and his aides appearing proudly with their hijabbed wives (one of his ministers is publicly polygamous), singing the praises of Islam, so visibly different in spirit and letter from Ataturk. The re-islamizing of Turkey is most evident in the government's vastly expanded support for the Imam Hatip (Imam and Preacher) schools. These are schools supported by the state, which provide pupils with a very heavy dose of religious education. Under Erdogan, these schools have multiplied. Support for Imam Hatip upper schools, for boys and girls aged 14 to 18, doubled from 2017 to 6.57 billion lira ($1.68 billion) in 2018 — nearly a quarter of the total upper schools budget. Although the 645,000 Imam Hatip students make up only 11 percent of the total upper school population, they receive 23 percent of funding — double the amount spent per pupil at mainstream schools.

Since 2012, when Imam Hatip education was extended to middle schools for pupils aged 10 to 14, total pupil numbers have risen fivefold, to 1.3 million students in over 4,000 schools. The government intends to complete construction of 128 Imam Hatip upper schools in 2018, and has plans to build a further

50, the budget and investment plans show. Turkey has also increased religious education courses at regular state schools, some of which have been converted into Imam Hatip schools. Religious studies take up about 1/3 of the time in the Imam Hatip schools.

Erdogan has removed all restrictions on wearing the hijab. In the heyday of Kemalism, army recruits who were found reading the Qur'an too diligently were marked — informally — as non-officer material. Now the devout are favored for such promotion. From 2002 to 2013, Erdogan built 17,000 new mosques, some of them mega-mosques. Since 2013, another 8,000 have been built, meaning Erdogan has been responsible for 25,000 new mosques in Turkey. He has also been building huge mosques outside Turkey, including the mega-mosque just opened in Cologne, to serve Turks abroad.

All of this shows how systematically Erdogan is bringing Turkey back to Islam, undoing Ataturk's legacy every way he can, and paying special attention to the religious education of the young.

> *Akyol offered a suggestion to begin encouraging this change[emphasizing human rights in Islam].*
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> *"One way to bring human rights … is to minimize the role of Islamic law and bring secular laws that will establish equality," he said. "And this has been tried, and it's worked."*

Yes, it has been tried, and it has worked. But again, only in Turkey. And only temporarily. By the Tanzimat ("reorganization") reforms in the mid-19th century, the Ottomans did away with the dhimmi status for non-Muslims. Under Ataturk and his epigones, women were given legal equality with men: the right to vote, an end to legal polygyny, equal rights of inheritance, and equal value given to the testimony of women. But nowhere else in the Muslim

world, save Turkey, have secular laws established complete equality between men and women, and between Muslim and non-Muslim. In Turkey itself, the systematic undermining of Islam by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk has been reversed. With his vast mosque-building and his expansion of the Imam Hatip religious schools, Erdogan has been molding the minds of the young, and the attitudes of families, to accept the centrality of Islam.

> *Akyol pointed to the example of Turkey following World War I as an example of how secularization of laws can help modernize societies. Akyol also said the most permanent solution to advancing religious toleration is reinterpreting Sharia and the Quran altogether.'*

Secularization after World War I was made possible by a very particular set of circumstances: the disaster of military defeat, and the appearance of a remarkable man, Mustafa Kemal, later known as Ataturk. The military defeat meant the breakup and loss of the Ottoman Empire's lands beyond Anatolia. The "backwardness" of Turkey was associated with a retrograde Islam that some blamed for the Turkish defeat. Ataturk had been a war hero (at Gallipoli) and he was a strong leader who managed to keep Turkish Anatolia together, and did not yield, despite Allied pressure, on the question of an independent Kurdistan. He was always a committed secularist, and the laws he passed helped, in Akyol's phrase, to "modernize [Turkish] society." But Ataturk was unique — there have been no other successful reforming Ataturks in Muslim countries. And even Ataturk's reforms turned out not to be permanent. For what Ataturk did is being methodically undone by Erdogan.

> *"Another approach is to reinterpret Sharia, and that's what I'm interested in because once you push the religious convictions aside for secular institutions, they're still there," [Akyol] said. "They will want to come back, and there will be a tension between them and the secular space."*

How can one "reinterpret" Sharia, based as it is on the immutable texts of the Qur'an, that come straight from Allah, and from stories in the Hadith where Muhammad's words and deeds have been dutifully recorded, and long ago were ranked according to their "authenticity" by hadith scholars?

It would be most useful if Mustafa Akyol could offer us a few examples of the kind of re-interpretation of Qur'anic verses he has in mind, and above all, how he thinks one and a half billion devout Muslims can be made to accept, and to believe in, such reinterpretation. Ataturk, the only successful modernizer of a Muslim society, did not "re-interpret" the Qur'an and hadith; he rode roughshod over them.

> *"The best way to go about reinterpreting the Quran is through historicism, which focuses on divine intent in the context of the work's initial production, Akyol said.*
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> *"God spoke not in a vacuum, he spoke in a context, in a society that had a culture," he said. "Therefore, when you look at the Qur'an, you should look at the divine intent and you should bring it to today with the impact but not the social context."*

"Historicism" here is simply a different name for historical context. What Akyol is suggesting is what small armies of Muslim apologists have been relying on for years. Whenever a particularly disturbing and violent Qur'anic verse is brought to their attention — say, 2:191-193, 4:89, 8:12, 8:60, 47:4 — they claim it must be understood as applying only in its "historical context." These verses are meant, they insist, not to apply to all enemies of Muslims for all time, but only to particular enemies at a certain time and place, 1,400 years ago. These apologists don't believe this themselves but, well-versed in taqiyya, they want you to believe it.

Mustafa Akyol wants Muslims to start putting the Qur'anic verses into the "context" for which he claims they were meant.

They should look at the "divine intent" — when Allah said to "kill all the Infidels," he was not saying to "kill all the Infidels" whenever and wherever you can. His real intention, the "divine intent" he was conveying, was that Muslims, in 7th century western Arabia, should kill this or that particular group of non-Muslims. "Context." You must feel better already.

> *Whereas the West views many Middle Eastern countries as medieval, Akyol said, Middle Eastern countries view the West as exploitative and hypocritical. He said the best way for Western countries to promote secularization in Middle Eastern countries is to remain principled and set an example through their actions.*

The West does not think of Middle Eastern countries as "medieval," for that would imply some progress from the beginning of Islam to a "medieval" period, when all further progress then stopped. From its beginnings, Islam's texts have remained immutable, though Muslim societies and individuals have sometimes more, and sometimes less, hewed to the beliefs the Qur'an and hadith inculcate. The people in these countries are in thrall to an ideology that is both a religion and a politics, that attempts to regulate every area of life. The word "medieval" is used by some in the West to describe Islam not literally but rather, and accurately, to mean "backward," "stuck in the past," "incapable of change."

Akyol continues:

> *"If the West wants to help in advancing human rights … they can do one thing and that is to be principled," he said. "Do not use these concepts for colonial design, do not use these concepts sometimes only to advance the rights of your own people, do not use these concepts to bash the regimes that are your enemies, but then, when the same [violations of human rights] are committed by the regimes that are your allies, don't look the other way."*

By using the telling phrase "colonial design," Mustafa Akyol betrays more of his worldview than he likely intended. All those absurd charges by Arabs and Muslims about the damage inflicted on them by "Western colonialism," or on "Palestinians" by the "colonial state of Israel" (the Israelis being the colonizers, and the "Palestinians" the colonized) are summoned up. But the Arabs were among the peoples least affected by Western colonialism. It never touched the Arabian peninsula. The only Western interference there was the successful attempt, by the Royal Navy, to interdict the Arab trade in black African slaves. In Iran and Afghanistan, there were no European colonists. In Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, there were no European colonists, though there was a small European presence, which is a different thing. That is, there was no large-scale movement of Europeans into these territories to exploit their people and their resources. Both France and Great Britain held League of Nations Mandates — the U.K. for Iraq, and France for Lebanon/Syria. This meant they had committed themselves to the very opposite of what colonialists did. The duty they assumed as Mandatories was to bring these mandated territories successfully to statehood, as they did. Jordan was not colonized by Great Britain; rather, it came into existence because of the British. In North Africa, France had a limited presence, lasting only about 40 years in both Morocco and Tunisia. The only French colony, in the true sense of the term, was in Algeria, where the French did settle large numbers of people, and the French presence lasted from 1830 until 1962. The great imperialist power that ruled over the Arabs in both the Middle East and in North Africa was, for many centuries, Akyol's own country, Turkey, in its Ottoman guise.

Akyol presumes to preach to the West about what it must do to help Muslim countries modernize. It should not use the absence of "human rights" as a reason for "bashing" certain other — that is, Muslim — countries. Why not? If Erdogan rounds up 100,000 Turks, and imprisons 50,000 of them without any

semblance of due process, in a hysterical campaign against "Gulenism," and also imprisons more journalists than any other country in the world, why shouldn't the West criticize him? Wasn't that criticism "principled"? Was Akyol glad or mad that the Americans made such a fuss over the imprisonment of Pastor Andrew Brunson? Does he consider that brouhaha to have been unacceptable "bashing" of Erdogan, or was it a "principled" stand for the rights of one man? Surely Akyol is pleased that the Europeans and Americans have severely criticized Saudi Arabia for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Isn't that principled, especially if the West, as part of its protest, refuses to go through with tens of billions of dollars in arms sales to the Saudis? Have the Americans been wrong to criticize the ayatollahs and mullahs who are crushing the Iranian people? Wasn't that "principled"? Wasn't the American government being "principled" when it went to war, and spent $6 trillion in order to bring what it hoped would be reasonably-functioning democracies, with human-rights guarantees, to both Iraq and Afghanistan, that had endured the monstrous regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban? It was naive, it was confused, it was a great waste in the end of American resources, but it was not "unprincipled."

The greatest recent lapse in America's record on "human rights" in Muslim countries concerns the regime of El-Sisi in Egypt. It is true that in 2017, the State Department did issue a report criticizing human rights abuses in Egypt. Some military aid was even withheld, and some non-military aid was cut that same year, but there has apparently not been any American pressure since then on El-Sisi. The military aid was restored in 2018 without, it seems, any request for a quid pro quo. But the American reluctance to come down hard on El-Sisi is not hypocrisy, as Akyol might see it, but reflects the keen awareness that in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, which just a few years ago was in power, remains a threat. El-Sisi does not want his country to have to endure another Mohamed Morsi, and his methods are harsh by Western, but not by Middle Eastern

standards.

When Akyol deplores the use of "human rights" rhetoric by the Americans and other Westerners "to advance the rights of [their] own people," I'm confused. Does he think the West is using "human rights" merely as a club to selectively, and therefore unfairly, "bash" only Muslims, and even then, only Muslims with which the West is not allied? Doesn't he think we mean it? Haven't Western governments raised human rights issues with many non-Muslim leaders, such as Duterte in the Philippines, Chavez and Maduro in Venezuela, Mugabe in Zimbabwe? And hasn't the West also raised human rights issues, too, with Muslim states that are geopolitical allies, including Saudi Arabia (notably in the case of Raif Badawi) and Turkey (if we can optimistically still call Erdogan's Turkey an ally)? Shouldn't he welcome the West's raising of the issue of human rights even if it "advances" the rights of "[its] own people"? And what does that mean? Akyol wants us to be "principled" but not, apparently, if being "principled" would mean advancing our own interests. We should be principled enough to not be principled, if invoking those principles could help us, which Akyol, in principle, deplores. Did you understand that last sentence? No, I didn't either.

First published in *Jihad Watch* [here](#).