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## The New Intellectual Capital of Turkey : Muslim Intellectuals

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### Abstract

A new genre of intellectuals has newly arisen in Turkey. They are coming from Islamic backgrounds. They are different from both modernizing elites of State and traditional Ulema of Islam. The most distinctive feature of them is that they are self-confident towards western philosophy and intellectuals, while being pudent towards people. In this article both defining features of new Islamic Intellectuals by comparison and contrast to state intellectuals and ulema.

**Keywords:** *Intellectual Capital, New Turkey, Muslim Intellectual, Vernacularization of Modernity*



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# The New Intellectual Capital of Turkey: Muslim Intellectuals

Dr. Ensar Nişancı

## I. Introduction

In the post 1980 era in all spheres of life Turkey has undergone so big changes and transformations that some intellectuals used the phrases like “silent revolution”(Yavuz, 2003:1-8), “emergence of a new Turkey” (Yavuz, 2007: 1-20) to signify particular consequences of that conjuncture. Of course not all decades are to witness to the same, unilinear and homogenous processes with respect to dynamics informing New Turkey. First decade is of particular importance with respect to the creation of new economic opportunity spaces by then economic restructuring programs for the emergence of a new businessmen group mostly organized under the umbrella of MÜSİAD. MÜSİAD, as a newly emerging and competent agent in export oriented economy of Motherland Party –then governing party- has become a major challenging force against the privileged business man club of TUSİAD. The second decade has been a witness to many setbacks for the newly arising classes and the capital caused by the old governing elites mostly positioned in military and

judiciary higher ranks of bureaucracy. The tensions between old and the new dynamics and classes of Turkey caused some setbacks, backpedaling, political crises so much so that culminating to a covert military coup d’etat in 1997 on 28 February. The next decade however it is tension ridden is witness to revolutionary changes not just in economic sphere but in political, social arenas as well. Just like new business classes emerged in previous decades new genre of political and intellectual personas started to take the scene in Turkey. New capitalist group has pulled attention of academic studies but the Islamic intellectuals are not yet taken the necessary attention. Whereas they are utmost importance in the formation of intellectual capital behind Justice and Development Party (JDP).

In this article I will write about the rise of a new class of Muslim intellectuals in Turkey in the past two decades. In order to better describe the characteristics of this new group of Muslim intellectuals and their difference from the previous generations of Muslim and Islamic intellectuals and from the secular and non-Islamic intellectuals in Turkey, I will try to answer the questions of “Who are the new Muslim intellectuals?”, “What are their certain characteristics?”, “What makes the new Muslim intellectuals different from

previous Muslim intellectuals including the ulema and other leading non-islamic intellectuals in Turkey?” “How do they affect Islamic discourse?” and “What is their influence in Turkish society?”

There is an emerging generation of Muslim intellectuals in Turkey. I think that studying this generation of intellectuals will not only be helpful for understanding the transformation of Islamic identity and discourse in contemporary Turkey but also will be instrumental for the understanding of the dynamics of Turkish society at large.

## **II. State Intellectuals:**

Before starting to talk about the new generation Muslim intellectuals, I think that it is important to go back to the early years of Turkish republic and briefly look at the general characteristics of the intellectuals.

The founding fathers of the Turkish republic were thinking that the reason why Ottoman Empire declined and why the Turkish society could not keep up with the developmental achievements of the West were because of the tradition and religion.

For example, for Mustafa kemal “the teacher of the newly established nation,” “it was the religion which blocked the innate development potential of the

Turks.” Similarly, the founding fathers of the republic had the idea that cutting all the ties from the past and from the religion will solve the problems and help develop the Turkish nation.

In order to overcome these obstacles they instrumentalized secularism, positivism and nationalism, three major concepts of western model of modernism. Therefore, the main objective of the new republic was to modernize through westernization. In order to achieve this goal, the founding fathers primarily including Mustafa Kemal wanted to build a new society and a nation state which will be the guardian of these modern values. In this regard, the state implemented radical reforms in order to reshape all segments of the society according to western modern values and principles. For example, the state abolished the caliphate, religious schools and sufi lodges. In addition, the state replaced the old ottoman alphabet with the new Latin alphabet. I think that with these reforms the state and its founding fathers wanted to create a tabula rasa so that they can manipulate the minds and the lives of the citizens and thereby create a modern nation state (Nişancı, 2001).

Therefore, the state supported and educated new elites who embraced the

ideals of the secularist and modernist kemalist state, after the establishment of secularist Turkish republic in 1923. These state elites were the agents of the state ideology of a top-down transformation and reformation approach (İnsel: 1997: 21). Therefore, these elites had a Jacobin mentality. They were outside and above the society as they were supporting an idea “for people and against people” by presenting themselves as the emancipators of the people and the nation. They were different from the society with their way of life including their dressing styles.

In this regard, their main goal was to marginalize the religion and the tradition and to exalt the secularist modern identity and way of life without criticizing the west. In other words, they were criticizing the tradition but praising the West. I think that they were looking at the society from an orientalist perspective. I also think that it would be appropriate to call these intellectuals as native orientalists.

Moreover, they were not producing the knowledge for themselves but for a project which made these elites a higher status group in society. That is why; most of these elites were part of the state bureaucracy working as teachers and professors.

I think that the early intellectuals of the Turkish republic were more of “organic

intellectuals” in Gramscian terms. Because, they did not question and criticize the modernity. They just accepted and welcomed the modernization ideals of the new republic and worked as the social engineers of the modernization project of the kemalist state.

The dominance of the regime’s intellectuals were paramount until the end of one party rule in 1950. Their influence diminishingly continued until the 1980’s, which represented declining power of nation states and the rise of neo-liberal policies.

### **III. First Generation Muslim Intellectuals (Ulema):**

While the early republic was pushing for its reforms with the help of its intellectuals, there were also resisting and challenging groups including major Islamic movement leaders and religious scholars such as Mehmed Zahid Kodku, Said Nursi, Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan and Elmalili Hamdi Yazir. Most of these religious intellectuals were defending the religion against materialist philosophy and secularist ideology.

These intellectuals were also affected by revivalist thinkers such as Cemaladdin Afgani and Muhammad Abduh. That is also why the first generation Islamic intellectuals represented

a revivalist movement. These intellectuals supported the ideas that Islam as a religion and as a way of life was not against science and development. They rather argued that the ills of society can be cured if the individuals and the institutions are lived and functioned according to the principles of “true Islam.” Since Islam was under the attack of modernist and positivist ideologies, some of these early intellectuals had an apologetic approach in defending the religion.

While the modernist state intellectuals were supported by the republic, religious scholars and intellectuals were persecuted. For example, Iskilipli Akif was tried in exceptionally authorized “İstiklal Mahkemesi courts” and executed in 1926 since he rejected wearing the hat. Said Nursi was persecuted many times, jailed and exiled in different parts of the country.

These early religious intellectuals were well accepted by the masses. For example, Said Nursi according to one of the court reports had over five hundred thousand followers in 1947. In addition, these older generation religious intellectuals primarily including Mehmed Zahit Kodku, Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan and Said Nursi have been very influential in shaping the later generation Muslims’

religious and political discourses. All Nur movements are following Said Nursi’s, Iskenderpasa Community is following Mehmed Zahid Kotku’s, and Sulaymanci communities are following the teachings of Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan.

#### **IV. Second generation Muslims (Islamist Intellectuals):**

After the first generation of Islamic scholars who were educated in Ottoman educational institutions, a new group of muslim intellectuals who were educated in the republic’s secularist educational system began to emerge after the 1970’s. These intellectuals including Ali Bulac, Rasim Ozden Oren, Ismet Ozel, Alparslan Acikgenc and Nazif Gurdogan became more visible after 1980’s. These intellectuals mainly appealed to the university students.

Unlike the first generation Islamic intellectuals, these second generation Islamic intellectuals did not frequently refer to Quran and Hadith. Rather, they used a modern rhetoric and spoke about meta-narratives. One of their major aim was to prove that the sources of the problems in the Muslim world in general and in Turkey in particular was colonialization of Muslim muslims’ life and minds by the western ideas and values. Therefore, they argued that cutting all the

ties from the western influence will solve the problems. For example, Ali Bulac a leading second generation Islamic intellectual, argued in his first book “Modern Concepts and Orders” he published in 1987, that the concepts used by the secular groups in turkey were profane which were coming from a foreign culture and civilization. Therefore, the solution, for him, was to cleanse the minds of Muslims polluted by the Western ideas.

These second generation elites were supporting both the Islamization of politics as well as the Islamization of the knowledge. In short, I argue that the second generation Islamic intellectuals were reimagining Islam in the opposite mirror of the West. Therefore, I think that they looked at Islam as more of a political ideology rather as a source of ontological and moral teachings.

#### **V. New generation of (Post-Islamist) Muslim Intellectuals:**

The second generation Islamist intellectuals and their anti-western discourses remained influential until the Post-modern coup d'état in 1997 which facilitated the rise of a post-Islamist movement. After the coup d'état, the military, the secular bureaucracy including the judiciary and the secularist media formed an alliance to expel and eliminate

the Muslims from the public spaces especially from universities. For example, more than 40 academicians were laid off at Dumlupinar University because they were practicing Muslims and because they had connections with religious communities. In addition many Quran schools and religious non-profit organizations were banned during this time.

1997 or February 28<sup>th</sup> coup d'état represented a decisive process in determining the mindset of the new Muslim intellectuals. Since they have seen aggressive forms of state control and authority, they realized how state authority and unbalanced political power could turn into oppression and how uncontrolled power could lead to coercion. That is why they started supporting the idea of democratization of the political authority alongside the rule of law and to a certain extent they gave up the idea of controlling the political authority. Under this pressure, Muslim intellectuals started to change their discourse from Islamist rhetoric to a human rights and democracy oriented discourse.

These new generation intellectuals do not write and speak about Religious issues. Unlike the second generation Islamist intellectuals, these new Muslim intellectuals also do not glorify Islamic past unlike previous Islamists like Necip

Fazil and Sezai Karakoc. That is why I don't call the third generation as Islamic intellectuals. I think that defining these intellectuals as Post-Islamist intellectuals would describe them better.

Yasin Aktay, Ahmet Yildiz, Mucahit Bilici, Nihal Bengisu Karaca, Ahmet T. Kuru, Abdulhamit Bilici, Fikri Akyuz, Ekrem Dumanli, Hilal Kaplan, Bulent Kenes, Yalcin Akdogan, Mustafa Sentop, and Ishak Torun can be named among these new generation Muslim intellectuals.

These intellectuals are mostly coming from middle and lower middle class family backgrounds. They are well-educated and some of them are columnists, academicians and consultants. They are characterized in general by critical tendency towards all kinds of status quo.

As William Cittick noted, the new generation Muslim intellectuals were strongly influenced by their professions. That is why they became more individualist. They did not also ask the Question of what Quran is asking me to do. Rather they asked the Question of What I can find from the Quran. They did not talk about the obligations and duties of Muslims and themselves but talked about democratic rights and individual freedoms.

These new intellectuals also form alliances with other liberalist intellectuals both inside and outside the country. I think that the Abant platform is a good example of such alliances. Gazeteciler ve yazarlar vakfi "Journalists and writers foundation" started to organize meetings in Abant Turkey starting from 1998 one year after the 28 February coup d'état to discuss issues related to human rights and democracy. Although the organizers of the platform are affiliated with Muslim communities, the participants of the platform are also coming from other opinion groups of the Turkish society primarily including the liberals. Moreover, some of these intellectuals such as Yildiray Ogur and Bekir Berat Ozipek are collaborating with the "Genc Siviller" "The Young Civilians" a popular anti-authoritarian pro-democracy group which has been organizing demonstrations against elitism and military intervention in politics after 2000's.

Unlike the second generation Islamic intellectuals these new intellectuals are not using a discourse against post-colonialism and western ideals with essentialist approaches. In addition, the new generation intellectuals are not challengers of modernism as noted by Ihsan Dagi. In this regard, most of these

Muslim intellectuals are supporting Turkey's bid for EU membership unlike the second generation Islamic intellectuals. They are also supporting more inclusive policies, democratization of political processes and liberalization of the market economy.

After the establishment of the Turkish republic, the old Ulema were accepted by society but not by the state. The intellectuals of the republic were well accepted by the state and its secular institutions but not much by the society at large. The New Muslim intellectuals seem to be in between. At the beginning, they were not accepted by the state and they were trying to carve a space for themselves. Similarly, they were not well accepted by the religious communities at the beginning either because they were criticizing both the state authority and the authority of the religious communities. When they started speaking against the oppression of the state and the secularist establishment, they began to be embraced by the religious communities.

Unlike the second generation Islamic Intellectuals, the new generation of Muslim intellectuals looked at Europe as an ally in order to force the Turkish state for human rights reforms. The second generation of Islamic intellectuals would say that women should cover themselves

and wear headscarf since it is mentioned in Quran. However, the new generation referred to the human rights to justify why women should wear the Hidjab. For example, they said that the women have the right to choose whether she is going to wear hidjab or not and that the state should respect those rights.

Unlike the former religious elite or the ulema, they were educated in secular institutions and had a more secular discourse. However, they were not well-accepted by the state ideology because the secular discourse used by these elites was supporting ideas against the statuesque. The state elite on the other hand were both educated in secular institutions and supported by the state ideology because they lend their support to the state's secularist and modernist ideology.

The second generation intellectuals were largely influenced by post-colonial intellectuals in the Muslim world such as Ali-Sheriati, Sayyid Qutb and Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi. The first and second generation Muslims thought that emancipation would be realized by going towards the religion. The state elite were thinking that emancipation would come with going away from religion. The third generation Muslims supported the idea that emancipation would come through



democratization, freedom and liberalization.

As agents, new intellectuals do not support the idea of Islamization of society. Rather, they support democratization of public space and the expansion of human rights. They are more interested in the salvation of self from all forms of oppression and they are not much interested in establishing moral codes for the society. That is what we can say that the new intellectuals were affected pretty much from liberalism. The new Muslim intellectuals are both professionals and intellectuals. Their professional sides are more visible than their ideological side. That is also why we can conclude that the new Muslim intellectuals represent an internal secularization of religion and vernacularization of modernity.

## **VI. Conclusion**

I argue that Islamic political identity is a dynamic and the transformation in this identity does not only reflect the transformation of the Islamic and Muslim identity but also indicates the major transformation in Turkish politics.

They are an outcome of transformation of a post-Islamist paradigm.

This transformation also contributed significantly to the democratization process of Turkey. Their transformation in their identity also transformed Islamic discourse and gave rise to a post-Islamist paradigm.

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