Myths and Realities on Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*

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Abstract

There is a strong body of literature that claims that Islam and democracy are essentially incompatible. However, Islam like all other religions is multivocal and it has strong theorethical elements that can also work for a basis of a democratic polity. Throughout the Muslim world there are certain countries that achieved a considerable level of democratization. It is only the Arab world, not the Muslim world, that so far represents a complete failure in terms of democratic transition. The failure of Arab world should be attributed to more political reasons, such as oil economy and the rentier state model than to Islam. Lack of international support for pro-democracy movements in the region, under the fear that they might move towards an Islamist political system is also an important factor in the democratic failures in the region. However, democratic record of Turkey's pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party challenges these fears. With the international attention it attracts, particularly from the Arab world, Turkish experience provides a strong case for the compatibility of democracy and Islam.

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Mitos y realidades sobre el Islam y la democracia en el Medio Oriente

Resumen

Existe un gran cuerpo de literatura secundaria según la cual el islam y la democracia son incompatibles por definición. Sin embargo, el islam, al igual que otras religiones, tiene múltiples sentidos así como fuertes elementos teóricos que pueden servir como base para políticas democráticas. A lo largo y ancho del mundo musulmán existen algunos países que han logrado un nivel considerable de democratización. Solamente el mundo árabe, no el musulmán, representa hasta ahora el completo fracaso en términos de transición democrática. El fracaso del mundo árabe debería ser atribuido más a razones políticas, tales como la economía petrolera y el estado rentista, que al islam. La falta de soporte internacional para con los movimientos prodemocráticos en la región, bajo el miedo de que estos puedan inclinarse hacia sistemas políticos islamistas constituye también un factor importante en los fracasos democráticos de la región. No obstante, el éxito democrático en Turquía del Partido Proislámico de la Justicia y el Desarrollo pone en entredicho tales miedos. Con la atención internacional suscitada por el caso de este partido, particularmente en el mundo árabe, la experiencia de Turquía provee un ejemplo claro para establecer la compatibilidad entre la democracia y el islam.

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Introduccion

Orthodox secularization theory assumes that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance (See Norris and Inglehart, 2004). This is a deterministic and teleological understanding of history which considers religion as belonging to the early stages of human development. It should also be noted that this is not only an empirical prescription but also a normative definition. Adherents of secularization thesis believed that religion will lose its importance as modernity evolves, but also they believed that this secularization process is a pre-requisite for democratization. Yet, in the early 80's the whole world witnessed to "the resurgence of religion," an empirical reality that challenged the core of secularization thesis. The same years also witnessed to a "wave of democratization" throughout the globe. The almost simultaneous rise of both religion and democratization did not only challenge the orthodox modernization and secularization thesis empirically, it also brought a more nuanced theoretical discussions for the compatibility of religious discourse with democratization. Many scholars pointed to the fact that a whole scale secularization of societies is not necessary for democratization and religions may continue to play a public role without essentially harming the democratization experience. Moreover, some scholars pointed to the fact that "public religions"[1] may be an inductive instrument of democratic transition (See Casanova, 1994). This was most supported by the crucial role Catholic Church has played throughout the third wave of democratization. Indeed, the third wave is also labeled a "Catholic wave" (See Huntington, 1991; Philpot, 2004).

However, the Islamic world seems to constitute an exception to the convergence of religion and democratization as the third wave of democratization had largely missed the Islamic world. This reality, further highlightened with the 9/11 attacks, raised a whole scale suspicion towards Islam as an essentially anti-democratic and anti-modern religion. The eminent figures in the Western academia had pointed to Islam's incompatibility with democracy both in theory and in practice. This paper will analyze the debates on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. It will, first, discuss different aspects of Islamic theory that can be relevant with discussions on democratization. Then, it will take a look at the empirical picture in the Islamic

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[1] As opposed to the common assumption of the secularization theory that religions will and should privatize for the functioning of a modern society.

world in general and the Middle East in particular. After pointing to the actual situation of Islamic countries with regard to their degrees of democratization, it will finally analyze a current phenomenon in Turkey, Justice and Development Party (JDP). JDP will be analyzed within the discussions of Islam-democracy compatibility and the wider implications of the JDP movement will be brought into attention.

1.   Theoretical Aspects of Islam

The idea of a confrontation between a particular religion and modernity/democratization is not novel. Indeed, it was Catholicism that attracted attention to this confrontation up until 1980's as the key problem in the modernist paradigm. Characterized in a binary opposition with Protestantism, which is considered not only in relation with democracy but almost the source of everything related with modernity such as capitalism and nation state, Catholicism was demonized by the Western scholars, as the other of the Protestant world. Following the transformation of Catholicism as a pro-democratic force in the third wave of democracy, and in the post-cold war era, dominated by the self fulfilling prophecies of a clash between civilizations (See Huntington, 1996), Islam emerged as the new actor of Western demonology. Thus, all the problems once associated with Catholicism, including but not limited to authoritarianism —such as the absences of capitalism, nationalism, secularism—, are now associated with Islam.

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In such an environment, the study of Islam as a religion had been covered by a dust of biases, prejudices and misperceptions which had been exacerbated by the recent portrayal of Islam as a religion of suppression and autocracy through the main stream media. The most important and common of such misperceptions is associating Islam with theocracy. As Robert Hefner (See 2005) points out, Islam, through its long and diverse history and its many different forms in contemporary world (with the single exception of Iran and possibly the brief period of Afghanistan under the Taliban rule), has never created theocracies. Moreover, the idea of theocracy is quite alien to the Islamic world as there is no equivalent of clergy in Islam.[2] This is not to deny that Islam had developed

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[2] Here comes the source for the Iranian exceptionality. As one of the most evident examples of the multivocality of Islam, there are certain distinctions between two major sects; the majority Sunnis and the minority Shias. Unlike the dominant Sunni Islam, in Shia version of Islam, there is a strong class of clergy, with a strict hierarchy among them. However, the idea that the clergy should be ruling the country is a quite novel interpretation for the centuries old Shia theology. Known as the "wilayat al

its own scholars and that religious scholars throughout the Islamic history had pioneered (and to a certain extent still does) as prominent figures both in the societal and the state level. They also enjoy the exclusive capacity to understand and interpret religion. However, there is neither a universal organization that nestles them nor is there any hierarchy among these scholars. This would also mean that people are completely free in choosing any of the interpretations of any religious scholars they wish. Indeed, this lack of an authority itself can become a problem at certain times, as the question of "Who speaks for Islam" rises.

Non-existence of a "church" in Islamic theology concludes to the fact that Islam is like any other major religion, or indeed even more than any other major religion, is multi-vocal. This means there are multiple understandings of Islam and multiple interpretations, all of them which prioritize certain aspects of the religion. This means that throughout its long history Islam had been both a source of oppression and authoritarianism as well as a source of freedom and resistance to tyranny. Indeed, the most important historical legacy of Islamic law (*shariah*) had been to limit the powers of political leaders. Thus, one can easily understand the historical role of *shariah* as enabling "limited government." The *Quran'ic* verse that states "there shall be no compulsion in religion" is also a powerful base for religious tolerance and pluralism. Aside from such negative freedoms, there are certain aspects of Islam that can be a source of positive freedoms. The most important of them are *ijtihad* (interpretation), *ijma* (consensus), *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *shura* (consultation).[3] As already mentioned, *ijtihad* is a source for different interpretations and there is no hierarchy among different *ijtihads*. *İjma* literally meaning consensus considers a consensus among the Islamic scholars as the third source of Islamic law after *Quran* and *Sunnah* (practices and teachings of the prophet). Moreover, the more liberal interpretations of Islam understand *ijma* as the consensus of the community, thus, brings the community in the process of legislation. The final and, possibly the most important aspect with regard to democratic theory is the importance and indeed binding of consultation on Muslims. There are two verses in *Quran* which refers to *shura*. In one of them (38/42), *shura* is

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faqih" theory (Guardianship of the Jurist), this was formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1970's. Even then, it was not accepted by the highest authorities of Shia Islam. At the time of the Iranian revolution, among a dozen Grand Ayatollahs (the highest level in the hierarchy of Shia clergy) only one other than Khomeini approved this theory.

[3] For a more detailed account of these concepts and how they had worked throughout the Muslim history see Esposito and Voll, 1996, pp.11-53).

considered as a praiseworthy act;[4] while in the second verse (159/3) it is also a mandate for the true Muslim.[5] Moreover, there is also a historical base for this culture as the four successors of the prophet, who are also labeled by the majority Sunni Islam as the "rightful successors,"[6] were chosen by the Muslim community through a process of *shura* and election. All of these concepts and practices in Islamic theology and history provide an important dimension for building a democratic culture among the Muslim societies. This is particularly important as many democratic theorists have recently pointed to the importance of the vernacularization of the "democratic discourse." These are the crucial elements that would prevent portrayal of democracy as somewhat an alien concept among the Muslims.[7]

2.   The Incompatibility Thesis and the "Twin Tolerations"

However, the prevalent discourse not only in main stream media but also among prominent academics —like Ernest Gellner, Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis— continue to portray a contradiction between Islam and democracy. The core of this "incompatibility theory" is based on the assumption that Islam is inherently a political religion which does not leave any space for the open discussion and, thus, prevents burgeoning of democracy. First proposed by

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[4] Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance are praised.

[5] Thus, it is due God's mercy that you deal with them gently, and had you been rough, and hard hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you; pardon them therefore and ask pardon from them, and take counsel with them in the affair; so when you have decided, then place your trust in God; surely God loves those who trust.

[6] The major reason for the Sunni-Shia division came as a result of the question of succession. The Shia school considers only one of the four *caliphs* (successors) as legitimate.

[7] As Esposito and Voll had rightly pointed (See 1996, p. 7), certain reservations against the term democracy among some Muslims do not reflect an attitude against democracy, but reflect a desire to formulate political freedoms in more authentic terms. Thus, their objection to democracy is more rhetorical rather than substantial. In the past, many Islamic movements that consider free and fair elections as the only way of coming to power did not stick to the democratization discourse. However, this started to be shifted in line with the discussions on "multiple modernities" (See Eisenstadt, 2000) as it became apparent that insisting on the western dimension of democracy means to force Muslims to make a choice among westernization/democracy and their authentic values/religion. As a response to this insistence, a new attempt to formulate Muslim modernity and attempts of Muslims democracy had come to forefront. JDP of Tukey represents a striking example. What is novel for the JDP cadres is not their leaning for political freedoms (which they had started to do that long ago), but formulating these demands for freedoms through democratization discourse is novel. For this distinction between political freedom and democratization see Hefner, 2005. For a detailed analysis of JDP in this regard see Heper and Toktas 2003.

the famous historian Bernard Lewis, the thesis of incompatibility between Islam and democracy is based upon the "secularism resistant" nature of Islam (See Gellner, 1996). Arguing that Islam is the only "secularism-resistant" religion and it retains most of its power against the forces of modernization, Gellner (See 1996) concludes that the modernity produced in the Islamic world is essentially non-liberal and authoritarian.[8] This perception is based on a worldview that perceives secularization and modernization as an inseparable couple. The recent resurgence of religion in the modern world seems insufficient to convince the adherent of the orthodox version of secularization theory. Samuel Huntington (See 1996) declares this resistance to secularism as the major reason of democratic failure. Moreover, he widens the scope of his argument and declares all major world religions except from Western Christianity[9] and, paradoxically, Judaism as essentially non-secular and consecutively non-democratic. "In Islam, God is Caesar; in Confucianism, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar's junior partner" (Huntington p. 70, also quoted in Stepan, 2001). The essentialism in his argument leads him to declare that "It is not Islamic fundamentalists who are the problem, it is Islam" (Huntington p. 217, also quoted in Stepan, 2001). The source of the problem, according to Huntington, is the non-existence of state-religion separation in Islam and in other major world religions/civilizations. He claims that state-religion separation is a unique success of Western Christianity, and no other religion has managed (or will manage) this separation. The pessimist result of his analysis is that democratization is and will remain a unique feature of Western Christian civilization.

The core of Huntington/Gellner/Lewis argument can be classified as a) secularism (understood as a rigid separation between religion and the state apparatus) is essential for democracy; b) Western world is secular; c) non-Western world, and particularly the Islamic world, is not secular. Finally, as a result of

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[8] The Islamic version of modernity is not incompatible only with secularism and political liberalism. According to this view, Islam is incompatible with a series of concepts all of them which are considered to be a whole scale package coined in the Western experience of modernization. The list of concepts alien to the Islamic world includes: capitalism, civil society, and nationalism.

[9] He defines Western Christianity as Catholicism and Protestantism, but excludes Orthodox Christianity. This worthy of note insofar as Catholicism was perceived as an obstacle to democratization only a few decades ago. It would be an interesting exercise to check the texts written on the relationship of Catholicism and modernity, democratization, nationalism, capitalism etc. If one looks today at the texts written a few decades ago on the relation between Catholicism and democracy, and replaces the word Catholicism with Islam, one would see that almost same sentences are written today on the relationship of Islam and democracy.

these three premises we can conclude that non existence of secularism is the major source of the failure of democratization in the non-Western world. All of these claims are open to challenge. Indeed, in a very influential article, Alfred Stepan (See 2001) challenged all the three core arguments of the secularization school from the perspective of democratic theory. His response can be divided in two components: a theoretical rebuttal of the secularization school, and an empirical demonstration that challenges their basic assumption. Stepan starts first by questioning the necessity of secularism for democratization. The primary problem with the Lewis/Huntington/Gellner thesis is the assumption that state-church separation is a necessity for democratization, and, thus, this separation exists in every democracy on the world. Stepan reminds us that none of the main theorists of democratization (like Arendt Lijphart, Robert Dahl, Juan Linz and Stepan himself) considered secularism as a precondition for democratization. Moreover, he points that a strict state/church separation does not exist in most of the highly qualified democracies of the world. Moreover, he also maintains that such a strict separation might violate certain freedoms and be an impediment to democratization. He argues that a pre requisite for democracy is "twin tolerations —that is the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions" (Stepan 2001, p. 213). As he demonstrates throughout his article, there are multiple ways of crafting twin tolerations ranging from friendly separation of state and church to officially recognized and established churches. With that formulation Stepan also points to the fact that, in certain cases, secular regimes that take a hostile attitude towards religion and violate religious rights are in itself an obstacle to democracy. This would mean that secularism co-exists both with democracies and authoritarianisms. The main problem with the secularization thesis is the reduction of political regimes into a secularist-theocratic dichotomy. As Ahmet Kuru (2008) explains in his comparative work on multiple secularisms, this dichotomy is not helpful as secular regimes have great variations in terms of their policies towards religion from being openly hostile to being friendly separated.

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On the other hand, many democracies, including many of the core European Union members, are not secular in the sense of having a strict separation between religion and state. Indeed, many of these regimes have an officially established religion or an official church. From this point of view, Ahmet Kuru's analysis shows that there is no variation between secular regimes and regimes with an established religion in terms of being democratic or authoritarian.

The secularization thesis also assumes the incompatibility of a separation between state and religion due to the overly political nature of Islam. This brings us to the crucial problem of defining the appropriate level of the discussion of Islam and democracy. We should start questioning the phrase "Islam-democracy relation." As Gudrun Kramer has pointed out "it is not possible to talk about Islam and democracy in general, but only about Muslims living and theorizing under specific historical circumstances. This may sound evident enough, and yet it is all too often ignored" (1993, p. 4). Particularly, when the political scientists discuss the relationship between Islam and democracy they are actually discussing the attitudes of Muslims as distinct individuals and communities towards democracy. In contrast, it is theologians who would be more concerned with the arguments of Islam as a religion towards democracy. Although this assertion might seem quite obvious at the outset, it would be surprising to notice that most of the scholarly works produced on the Islamic world are still engaged with the religious indoctrination of Islam as either essentially anti-democratic or, on the contrary, essentially pro-democratic. All religions, as Stepan (See 2001) noted, are multivocal, they may have pro-democratic and anti-democratic— as well as pro-secular and anti-secular— interpretations. These interpretations are largely shaped by socio-political and economic contexts. In that sense, Islam is no exception. Although one can easily find authoritarian elements within it (just as one can find within any religion), Islam also maintains strong theoretical instruments mentioned above such as *ijtihad* (interpretation), *ijma* (consensus) and *shura* (consultation) that can work as basis for democratic regimes. Not surprisingly, throughout its 1,400 years of history, Islamic belief had been both a source of authoritarianism and a source of resistance to authoritarianism, and had been also a venue for public participation.

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My aim in pointing to the multivocality of this religion is not to prove (or disprove) that Islam is compatible with democracy. On the contrary, I am pointing to the fact that this is not the relevant topic for the discussion. There is no singular Islam that had been clearly delineated which can be either democratic or anti-democratic. Any of such arguments would fall into the trap of considering Islam in an essentialist manner. Thus, study of Islam by political scientists should be based on historical realities rather than theological claims. As Ira Lapidus (See 1975, quoted in Kuru 2008), one of the most important expert of Islamic history, maintains despite the theoretical claims state-religion separation has been a consistent aspect of Islamic world

since the first century of Islam.[10] Throughout its long history, Muslim societies had experienced so many forms of alternative political regime that any such generalization to define the nature of political regimes in the Muslim world is bound to fail. The idea that state-religion separation does not exist in the Muslim world can also be disproved by looking at the current state-religion regimes in Muslim majority countries. Once again if we look at Ahmet Kuru's (2008) four type regimes, we would see that only 11 of the 46 Muslim majority states are Islamic states where law making and judicial processes are regulated according to religious rules. There are 15 states in which Islam is the official religion (but without religious supervision on the legal system) and 20 secular states (among which 8 of them are electoral democracies, while 12 of them are secular autocracies). These numbers are important as they refute the myths on the secularism-resistant nature of Islam, and also prove that secularism can go hand in hand with both democracy and authoritarianism, and it also pushes us to look for alternative approaches to understand the relationship between Islam and democratization.

3.   Who Represents the Islamic World?

Would the defenders of the incompatibility thesis be justified in their claims—built on an interpretation of the Muslim world's democratic record— if analyses were focused on praxis in the Muslim world, and not on Islamic theology? The answer is partly yes and partly no depending on where the analyst is looking in the Muslim world. This brings us to another problem of identifying the Islamic world. Islam is a religion of more than a billion adherents and it is the majority's religion among the 46 Muslim countries throughout the world.[11] Contrary to the common perception, neither the Middle East[12] in general nor the Arab world in particular constitute the majority of the Islamic world. Only slightly more than a quarter of the world's Muslim population lives in the Middle East, and Arabs in whole constitutes 20% of the world Islamic community. This

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[10] Indeed, the recent literature on political Islam emphasizes the novelty of the concept of a union between religion and state. As Talal Asad (2003) has maintained, Islamic movements' interest to grasp the state power is the result of the dominance of modern state even in the most private sphere of life, rather than an overly political nature of the religion itself. In that sense, it is interesting to see that Huntington, Gellner, and Lewis share the same approach to Islam with the fundamentalists.

[11] I rely on Freedom House reports in this section. However, the number 46 is open to debate and this number shows slight changes throughout various reports prepared at different times due to the existence of some borderline cases such as Nigeria, Sierra Leona, Burkina Faso and Eritrea.

[12] Middle East throughout this article is understood as the region that includes all of the Arabic speaking states, plus Iran, Turkey and the Jewish state of Israel.

means that when conducting a discussion on the compatibility of Islam (read as the Muslims) with democracy, we need to have a wider perception that take into account the whole Islamic world. As it will be more apparent in the following pages, this should be kept in mind when looking at the empirical reality of the Islamic world with regard to democratization.

Let us first look at the overall picture in the Islamic world. Despite the points I made above on the multivocal interpretations of Islam, the cold empirical reality is that only 9 out of the 46 Muslim majority countries throughout the world can be considered as free countries. Although this is one of the lowest ratios in the world, as Daniel Brumberg and Larry Diamond points out (See 2003), the number is not trivial and the existence of electoral democracies throughout the Muslim world is itself a testimony to the multivocality thesis, and disproves the incompatibility thesis. Given the Muslim populations scattered around the globe, Alfred Stepan estimates that more than half of the Muslim world population is living under electoral democracies.[13] Yet, the more striking feature of the list of electoral democracies throughout the Muslim world is that there is only one electoral democracy in the Middle East, Turkey, and none in the Arab world. Only 16 of the 46 Muslim majority states are Arab states, and currently none of them is an electoral democracy. Moreover, in a very interesting article published in Journal of Democracy, Alfred Stepan and and Robertson Graeme (2003) has noted that compared with the economic level of development non-Arab Muslim world is exceptionally successful. They define these states as "electoral overachievers". Their analysis is based upon one of the most established arguments of the democratization literature that there is a strong correlation between level of democracy and the level of economic development, and there exists a minimal level of economic level necessary to sustain democracy. Accordingly, Stepan and Graeme point that non-Arab Muslim majority states in the overall perform better than their level of economic development would make us expect and they experienced considerable electoral competition where as non of the Arab countries had, with the only exception of Lebanon for a brief period before the civil war broke out in 1970's. Moreover, some Arab states perform below the level of their respective level of economic development would. This led Stepan and Graeme to conclude that there is an Arab electoral gap rather than a Muslim electoral

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[13] Among the nine electoral democracies in the Muslim world are the more populous states, such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Bangladesh. The total population of these three states makes 400 millions. Aside from other smaller electoral democracies in the Muslim world, like Senegal, Bosnia, and Albania, Stepan also includes the 150 million Indian Muslims who, though constituting a minority in India, had contributed immensely to the democratic system of the country.

gap, and there is an Arab exceptionalism rather than a Muslim exceptionalism with regard to democratization.

It is evident that Middle East as a whole is the most anti-democratic part of the Muslim world. Two countries with the highest rankings of Freedom House and Polity surveys are outside Middle East, and a third country with the highest scores, Turkey, is a non Arab Middle Eastern country. Thus, the contrast between the rest of the Muslim world and the Middle East is striking and needs an explanation. The persistence of authoritarianism is the most striking feature of Middle Eastern politics. This "success" of authoritarian regimes can be attributed either to the strength of the autocrats or to the weakness of their opponents, and in most of the cases in Middle East we are faced with both. Again, there are multiple ways to explain the strength of autocrats and the weakness of the opponents by referring to cultural, ideological, and economic structures. Once again, Islam is portrayed as the main explanatory tool. The limited success of Islamic world outside Middle East is explained by contingency, and the complete failure of Middle East—with the single exception of Turkey, which is an assertively secular state— is considered as a result of essential incompatibility of Islam with democracy. Moreover, the assertive secularism of Turkey is considered as a proof of the essential incompatibility of Islam and democracy (See Lakoff, 2004). Enough has already been said for the arguments of this incompatibility thesis and the Turkish case will be considered in more detail below. Let us first look at the roots of authoritarianism in Middle East.

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4. Alternative Explanations for Middle Eastern Autocracy

There are multiple possible explanations that come up to explain the continuity of authoritarianism in the Middle East, namely, economic, structural, cultural, and political approaches. The economic dimension of Middle Eastern autocracy is related with the rentier state model. As Fareed Zakaria (See 2004, p. 10) has pointed, the problem in the Arab world is wealth not poverty. Most of the Middle Eastern countries are damned by the "oil curse". In these countries the famous statement of American democracy "no taxation without representation" works in the opposite direction. In the oil rich countries of Middle East, there is no representation, partly, because there is no taxation. States that get most of their income from natural resources tend never to look for the legitimacy from their citizens. Moreover, the state control on economics is not limited to the oil income. In the non-oil producing countries too, the state elites' firm grip on whatever economic resources they can acquire gives them an incentive to continue an

autocratic social pact. Rulers collecting all the available economic resources in their hands provide jobs and subsidies, and fund a huge patronage system that transforms the middle class, professionals, businessman, and intellectuals, into dependents (See Brumberg and Diamond, 2003, p. xii). Thus, the representatives of the middle class who is usually expected to lead the pro-democratic opposition do not play the same role in the Arab world. At this point, the contrast between Turkey and the Arab world is meaningful. While the state in Turkey also controls remarkable economic resources, compared with the Arab world, there are more "opportunity spaces" open for the newly emerging bourgeoisie from the inner Anatolian landscape. It is indeed this Anatolian bourgeoisie the source of democratization in the country, and recently they constituted the backbone of the JDP government (See Yavuz, 2006, pp. 1-19).

While combination of economic and political power leads to the strength of authoritarianism, other side of the coin point to the weakness of opposition both institutionally and economically. Such a disproportionate power balance between the rulers and opponents prevent the emergence of pacts that had paved the way for the Latin American democratization (See Brumberg and Diamond, 2003, p. xii). A cultural explanation for the weakness of the opposition is the alleged absence of civil society in the region (See Abootalebi, 1998). Once again, normative assumptions on Islam's incompatibility with civil society dominate the relevant studies. Referring to the origins of the concept, for instance, Serif Mardin (See 1995) declares civil society as a Western dream that would not translate into Islamic terms. According to Mardin, in the Muslim world, society waits for the "just prince" to initiate reforms and take control of societal development rather than mobilizing itself independently. In accordance with traditional Orientalism[14] that conflates the East with passivism and fatalism, the Middle Eastern societies are understood to be constituted of "people...[who] as a whole tend to consider life as a game of chance" (Sariolghalam, 1997, p. 59). In this view, "One has no alternative but to suffer the inevitable and basically negative vicissitudes of life" (Sariolghalam, 1997, p. 59).

A seminal two volume study, conducted by Richard Norton and his collaborators, empirically showed the opposite. Norton's study (1995, 1996)

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[14] Richard Norton (1993, p. 212) rightly argues that this orientalist analysis can be traced back to Karl Wittfogel's influential work *Oriental Society*. According to Wittfogel (1957, quoted in Norton, 1993), absence of a civil society to counterbalance despotic power was a marker of oriental society, and it is this lacuna that lies at the heart of the orientalist analysis.

concluded that Middle Eastern societies were far from being passive and fatalist, they were indeed quite active, especially given the authoritarian political settings they operate in. This study became quickly conventional wisdom on the studies on Middle Eastern civil society, but left the question of the strength of authoritarianism still unanswered. Ernest Gellner, who long ago pointed to the strength of Muslim society (1981), claimed that the problem is not the weakness of society, but its disinterest in freedom. Comparing the pro-democracy attempts at Eastern Europe, that mark an important edge of the third wave, with the Islamic (should better be Middle East) world, Gellner (1996) claims that there is feeble if any yearning for freedom throughout the Muslim world. The validity of such statements had largely collapsed through the recent demonstrations in the Arab world.

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The recent events that started in Tunisia during the first month of 2011, and then spread to Egypt and from there to the rest of the Arab world, show that there are more than a "feeble yearning" for democracy through the Arabic world. Yet, these demonstrations brought into attention another and often overlooked aspect of authoritarianism in Middle East: the international political context. At the time of the writing of this article, Tunisian demonstrators had been successful in forcing the authoritarian leader Ben Ali to leave the power, the turbulences were still continuing in Egypt, and the results of the uprisings were still inconclusive. Thus, it is almost impossible to predict whether these demonstrations will evolve to the kind of demonstrations that had started in Poland two decades ago and swiped all the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Therefore, at this stage we need to refrain from declaring these events as the fourth wave, though it has the potential to turn into a wave of democratization, it is also highly possible that authoritarian regimes will overcome this unrest and continue to enjoy their stay in power.

However, one thing is clear; the Arab people who filled the streets with the demand of freedom and who showed the necessary determination to pay the blood tax, lack the international support Polish syndicate workers had enjoyed. Neither the American government nor the European states made an open declaration of support for the millions in the Arab streets who want to get rid of their authoritarian regimes. At least they did not until the time of writing of this article. That means a lack of support during the whole period of uprisings in Tunisia, and during the first week of demonstrations in Egypt; the most crucial stage of the uprising. Moreover, the main stream media coverage also lacks the enthusiasm of the reports on 1989 East European demonstrations. Instead, both

the media and the government seem to be more concerned on the state of (authoritarian) secularism in these countries and the strategic effects of these revolutions to Israel.[15] In their seminal study of democratic transition, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) point to the importance of international environment and to the diffusion effect of democratization. Indeed, despite the strength of anti-system demonstrations and public demands for more political freedom, the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe would never materialize if Mikhail Gorbachev had not made it painfully clear to the autocrats of Eastern Europe that Soviet Union is no more willing (or indeed no more able to) support their illegitimate governments (See Westad, 2005 and Leffler, 2007).

Thus, an important feature of authoritarian regimes, especially of the non-oil producing states, is their authoritarian secularism. Unlike the common perceptions, the most brutal autocrats of Middle East are not Islamic fundamentalists but secular military backed autocrats. As we have already mentioned, these regimes also enjoy international support. In an apologetic defense of secular autocrats, Fareed Zakaria claimed that "autocratic, corrupt, and heavy-handed… [Arab rulers are] still more liberal, tolerant, and pluralitisc than those who would likely replace them" (2004, p. 9). Thus, Muslim World had two make a choice between an evil and a lesser evil.

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An analogy between the discourse on anti-democratic Catholicism and the experience of Latin America as bedrock of authoritarianism with anti-democratic Islam and the persistence of authoritarianism in Middle East is inspiring. As part of the Monroe Doctrine, Latin America had always been a strategic place for American foreign policy. In that sense, Americans preferred pro-American dictators in this strategic region to democratically elected leaders who were inevitably more independent vis-à-vis American policy preferences.[16] A series of events starting with the 1974 oil crises, and peaked up after the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, increased the strategic importance of Middle East in the American foreign policy marked by the declaration of the Carter Doctrine. At least since Carter doctrine, the West prioritizes security over

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[15] This is even so for the more liberal media, (See "Freedland," 2011, February 1 and "Kirkpaatrick," 2011, January15).

[16] A retrospective analysis on Cold war maintains that forces that United States deemed as dangerous were not necessarily Marxists. Indeed, most of these movements are better called "nativists" (See Westad, 2005) Thus, one wonders how we would label the so called fundamentalists in the Muslim world after a few decades from now on. It is highly possible that in retrospective analyses it will be maintained that these religious groups were conservative/nationalist/nativist rather than fundamentalist.

democracy in the region[17] and prefers pro-West autocrats. In this case, these autocrats are considered as the barrier against the Islamic movements. One is forced hard not to make the analogy with the military dictators of Latin America who were considered as bulwark against leftist extremism during the Cold War, and the Middle Eastern autocrats who are considered as a set against Islamic extremism in the age of the "Clash of Civilizations".

We have already mentioned that Islamic groups are not in power in most of the authoritarian regimes. However, this is not to deny the fact that some, but definitely not all, of the Islamic opposition groups in these regimes also have authoritarian tendencies. Esposito and Voll (See 1996) gives us some important criteria to evaluate the diverse experiences of Muslim groups in these regions: whether the Islamic groups are legal or not, whether they are allowed to participate in the political system as legitimate actors, or whether they are pressed by the political rulers to remain as an underground organization. The vast range of experiences show that the more chances to participate in the system the more pluralistic and democratic the Islamic groups they are. The country with the largest possible ways to participate in the system is Turkey, as the country has institutionalized a tradition of power change through election box. Despite all the major shortcomings of the democratic regime in turkey, it still enables to keep the Islamic groups in the system, and the country witnessed the emergence of JDP in the last decade as the major symbol of Muslim democracy through the region.

From this point on I will look at the government experience of JDP in Turkey, its significance for the debates on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, for the democratization experience of Turkey, and for the attempts of democratization in the Middle Eastern region.

5.   Turkey: A Testimony to the Secularization Thesis?

I believe there are many factors that make Turkey an interesting empirical case aside from its long and complicated democratic transition period. Turkey is a paradigmatic case in many respects. First of all, Turkish state ideology is based on the emulation of secular French nation state model, and, in many aspects, Turkish secularism is even more radical than the French case. Being a Muslim

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[17] This statement came almost word by word by Condoleeza Rice as a confession for the failure of American foreign policy towards the region (See "BBC News", 2005, June 20).

majority country (almost 99 %of the population is Muslim), with a very assertive secularism and a long history of democratic transition, makes Turkey a uniquely interesting case. Also, contributing to Turkey's uniqueness as a case study is the fact that many scholars who insist on the authoritarian nature of Muslim societies like Ernest Gellner and Bernard Lewis consider Turkey an exceptional success story in the Muslim World. Ernest Gellner argues that although Muslim World is an exception in general, Turkey is the exception to the exception, and he says that he was always "fascinated" by the Turkish experience of secularization and nation building (See Gellner, 1994). They praise Turkey as a considerably democratic country, which achieved its status partially as a result of its strict policies on secularism. This line of thought is based on the conviction that in Muslim countries achieving democratization is possible only through radical measures against any kind of religious freedom. Gellner, who considers that democracy has no chance in the Muslim World, argues that Turkish state is an exception, since historically powerful state tradition enabled the state to eliminate Islam and to nationalize its population. This point is more eloquently described by Lewis in his classical *Emergence of Modern Turkey*. Lewis argues that "God had to be replaced twice: as the source of sovereignty, by the people, and as the object of worship by the nation" (1961, p. 479). Transition to democracy in Turkey had been possible only because of this elimination of Islam, and because of the nationalization of the population. Thus, Turkey appears an empirical case that proves the necessity of secularization as a pre-requisite of democratization and normatively more important than democratization.

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Followers of this view defend that if Turkey succeeded any democratization —as unsatisfactory as it may seem— this had been possible due to its achievement in creating a religiously hostile secular nation state. The power of this argument is so strong that it affects even the most careful observes. For example Binnaz Toprak, normally an astute observer of state-religion relations in Turkey, claims that "As the history of the Republican Turkey demonstrates, however, *a Muslim nation can* establish, sustain and begin to consolidate a democratic form of government and a liberal conception of public life *as long as* its state distinguishes between religion and *public sphere*" (2006, p. 169. Emphasis added). Note the extremely radical conception of distinguishing between religion and *public sphere*. This is obviously a much more radical understanding of secularism than a separation between state and religion, not to mention twin tolerations. This view has wider implications for the whole Muslim World, as once Alfred Stepan and Robertson Graeme (See 2003) pointed to Turkish democracy as a support for the compatibility of Islam

and democracy, Sanford Lakoff (See 2004) responded that that Turkey could not be counted as an example because it was a strictly secular country. On the contrary, Lakoff continued, Turkey's relatively high level of democratization should be considered as an example for the incompatibility of democracy and Islam. "The more relevant implication of the Turkish experience is that Islamic beliefs may have to be overridden" (Lakoff, 2004, p. 134) in order to achieve democratization. The extension of this line of argument to the rest of the Muslim world, and particularly to the Arab world, is the hijacking of democracy by authoritarian secularists and the above mentioned unconditional support given the Arab secular autocrats by the Western democracies.

This glorification of Turkish success with modernization comes from a popular myth of Turkey being both the only secular and democratic country in the Muslim world. However, as it became apparent from the previous discussions, Turkey is neither the single secular state nor the most democratic state in the Muslim world. Two countries, Indonesia and Senegal, rank higher both in the Freedom House survey and in the Polity surveys. Moreover, the country still maintains to be a very interesting case to investigate the relation between Islam and democracy as this assertively secular state is being ruled by an Islamic oriented party since 2002. Since 2002, JDP enjoys a secure majority in the parliament (and this will likely to continue in the forthcoming 2011 elections), and rules the country with a strong government. Thus, a comparison of the democratic record of JDP with its more secular predecessors will likely to tell us much about the relation of Islam and democracy. Again, we can turn to the reliable Freedom House surveys for this comparison. Turkey's ranking in the Freedom House survey in year 2002 was 5 out of a scale of 7. Throughout the eight years of single party government of JDP, Turkey's trend had continuously been upwards. Turkey's rank in the most recent 2009 report raised to 3 (1 in Freedom House rankings represents the perfect democracy, while 7 represents the most oppressive authoritarian regime). These rankings would mean that Turkish democracy is still far from being perfect. However, they also mean that Turkish democracy had continuously developed throughout the JDP rule.

Despite the fact that Turkish democracy is far from being a consolidated democracy, Turkey has a long record of democratization. Indeed, as Ergun Özbudun (See 1996, p.125) has noted, technically, Turkey is a second wave democracy, and transition to democracy dates back to 1950. Since the start of multi party life in 1946, three problems stayed at the center of Turkish politics:

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the role of Islam in the public life, Kurdish demands for various levels of political recognition, and the continued military interference to daily politics in relation to the first two issues. As part of the demands for EU accession, JDP had to face all of these three problems.

JDP led Turkey's EU bid, and, under JDP rule, Turkey had finally achieved the status of an accession country. Obviously, this was a continuation of a long and constantly interrupted process of liberalization. Yet, in March 2004, the Council of Europe determined that "Turkey had liberalized more in the first two years of JDP rule than in the previous ten years" (See Smith 2005, p. 450) As a series of reforms in order to meet Copenhagen criteria, the legal regulations were made to address both the civil military relations and the Kurdish problem.[18] Despite all these attempts, the true litmus test for the Islamic oriented JDP will be its attitude against religious minorities, be it the non-Muslims but also the Muslim minority Alevis sect. [19]

6.   JDP Policies on Religion

Exclusions based on religious criteria—accompanied by a very hostile separation of religion and state that eventually turned into a control of religion by the state—led to a very unique case of secularism in Turkey, in which virtually all religious groups feel alienated and suppressed. We can map the religious affiliation of Turkey as falling into three essential groups: non-Muslims, Muslim minority sects—Alevis being the most important one—, and Muslims belonging to the majority Sunni sect. JDP appears as the representative of the majority Sunni sect and its policies in order to increase the freedom of Sunni groups, necessary for democratization, is not unexpected.

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[18] These regulations include the re-organization of the military dominated National Security Council, a body that enabled the military to intervene in politics. JDP had maintained civilian supremacy over military; a definite criteria for any democracy. The government also dealt with the Kurdish problem. In 2005, Prime Minister Erdogan paid a controversial visit to the Kurdish town Diyarbakir where he declared that he recognized the existence of the Kurdish problem, a brave statement, as the official discourse in Turkey for decades denied not only the existence of a Kurdish problem but also the existence of Kurds as a distinct people. Since then, government took a series of attempts (though far from being sufficient) for the peaceful solution of the Kurdish problem. The most significant of them was the start of a new TV channel that will broadcast in Kurdish by the state owned Turkish Radio-Television Corporation (TRT).

[19] Alevis are an important minority among the Turkish Muslims. Alevi Islam diverges from Sunni Islam for its tendency for heterodoxy.

However, an analysis of the JDP's policies towards other religious groups and particularly the non-Muslims is very informative on the debate of Islam and democracy in Turkey. Turkey's non-Muslim minorities still suffer a lot, but there has been a considerable amelioration in the recent years under the Islamic rooted JDP government. JDP has been able to diminish the anti-Christian discourse embedded in the official ideology and took various steps in order to increase the harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. This appeasement policy involves more symbolic gestures as putting ethnic Armenians on the JDP ticket in the local elections, as well as many legal changes related to the restrictions that non-Muslims face. On the legal bases, there has been important improvements, the most important being the passing of a new law on Religious Foundations in spring 2006. The limitations on the property rights of non-Muslim foundations were abolished, and some limited steps were taken to compensate for the previous confiscations.[20] The ban on the construction of churches and other worship places were also abolished. Hate speech towards non-Muslims were declared violations of the law. Another significant change was the abolition of the ban on giving Christian names. [21] These improvements are reflected in the voting patterns during the most recent elections. Non-Muslims voted considerably for the allegedly Islamist party as opposed to harshly Kemalist secular Republican Peoples Party (RPP) (See "Hürriyet," 2007, December 7 and "Hürriyet," 2007, May 6), an indication that they have much more freedom under the JDP government as opposed to the previous strictly secular Kemalist establishment.

The ruling JDP also took some steps for embracing the Alevi minority. JDP offered positions to prominent Alevis in the party organs, and also nominated them in the parliamentary elections.[22] In the Ramadan of 2007, Prime Minister Erdogan invited Alevi organizations to a public fast breaking, and became the first Turkish prime minister who legitimately recognized Alevis as a distinct group. Since last year, the government is conducting a series of workshops with the Alevi community that aims to address the problems of this religious minority in the country. The topics that these workshops aim to handle include the core issues

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[20] This change had been vetoed by the harshly Kemalist, then president of Turkey, Ahmet Necdet Sezer on the grounds that it violates secularism. The parliament had to re-accept the amendment in order to overrule the veto.

[21] This change is also related with Muslim ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds. Until this amendment, Kurdish names were also illegal, and it was obligatory for the parents to name their children in Turkish. Now, there is no official restriction on either ethnic or religious minorities.

[22] The most important among these nominees was Reha Camuroglu, a very influential Alevi intellectual.

such as rewriting books on religion (which is announced to be accomplished the following year) and the financing of religious Alevi institutions. Although no concrete policy improvements have been accomplished yet, it appears that the allegedly Islamist JDP is again much more understanding towards Alevis compared to its secular rivals.

Although JDP is frequently criticized by the old guard for having a hidden Islamist agenda and accused of trying to convert the country into a fundamentalist Islamist state, no serious observers of Turkish politics share this concern. There are also influential policy circles that insist that JDP is not so different from Taliban in terms of its actual policies (See Pipes, 2003, quoted in Yavuz, 2006). Considering the JDP policies on non-Muslims, in a country where xenophobia has dominated the political culture for decades, the only explanation for conducting parallels between Taliban and JDP would be an outright discontent not for Islamic fundamentalism, but any source of Islamic visibility. Such a vision that asks for the exclusion of religious people from the political system in Muslim majority countries transforms the democracy to an "impossible game" (See Casanova 2001, p.1064). Although limited, the overall success of JDP in democratic politics, compared to its secularist predecessors, not only points that Islamic oriented groups can adapt to electoral democracy; it also shows that they can also contribute to advance pluralist democracy. By showing that religious piety and democratic politics do not conflict, and indeed might be complimentary, as Ihsan Dagi rightly points out "The JDP's popular language of democracy and human rights had contributed to the legitimization for democracy among the more conservative Turkish people" (2006, p. 105). Thus, it had long time effects for the deepening of democratic values and an increase in the quality of democracy. Moreover, such a legitimization of democracy is not limited to the conservative Turks. More importantly, Islamic groups under the authoritarian Arab regimes are also influenced by the JDP model. After his arrival to his home from exile in London, Tunisian Islamic leader Rachid Gannouchi stated that they are inspired by the JDP experience (See "Today's Zaman," 2011, March 7). The continuous betterment of democratization in countries like Indonesia and Turkey under the Islamic oriented governments, and the effects of these Muslim democracies on the people of autocratic regimes, leading to a series of revolts throughout the Arab world, remind us that despite the overall low level of democratization of the Islamic world there are reasons to be optimistic.

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