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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW: CREATING THE DESIRED CITIZEN: IDEOLOGY, STATE AND ISLAM IN TURKEY

Shaheen Amid Whyte*

Ihsan Yilmaz. *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 250
AUD 141.95, 978-1108-83-255-7.

Ihsan Yilmaz¹ addresses a highly topical, timely and significant analysis of the modern Turkish state in his book *Creating the Desired Citizen*. The book examines the ideological, social and political constructs of what Yilmaz calls the “desired citizen.” He juxtaposes the desired citizen with tolerated and undesired citizens in a far-reaching assessment of Turkey’s ruling parties, nation-building exercises, authoritarian politics and social engineering programs designed to render, control and homogenise its citizens.

The book’s main argument is premised on the historical traumas inherited by the Turkish Republic following the capitulation of the Ottoman Empire. Yilmaz attributes the fall of the Ottoman Empire as triggering deep-seated insecurities, anxieties, fears and victimhood about Turkey’s self-image, survival and national identity. What emerged as a result, according to Yilmaz, was the creation of a national myth based on a pure Turkish race, long-term suffering, victimhood and a siege mentality to protect Turkey from “the evil Crusaders of Europe.”² Against this backdrop, Yilmaz demonstrates how this narrative shaped and sustained two rivalling ideologies: secular-Kemalism (1923-) and Islamist-Erdoğanism (2002-).

Structurally, the book is divided into five parts. The first is on Kemalism and its desired, undesired, tolerated citizen. In this section, Yilmaz provides a historical account of the rise of Kemalism, followed by a typological categorisation of the desired citizen of Kemalists and Erdoğanists. Yilmaz identifies the desired citizen under Kemalists as being simultaneously secular, Atatürkist, Sunni Muslim and Turk.³ The ideological construction of this type of citizenry is based on loyalty to secular nationalism, a deep reverence for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and a willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the Turkish nation. Yilmaz also identifies the “undesired” citizens under the Kemalists. These citizens consist of minority groups including: “Christians (especially Armenians and Greeks), Jews, Islamists, pious Muslims, leftists, socialists, liberals, democrats, Alevis and Kurds.”⁴ As Yilmaz demonstrates throughout

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² Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), xi, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 27, 55-56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

the book, each of these groups has suffered persecution, vilification and accusations of being internal enemies of Turkey or conspiring with the West. As for Islamists and pious Muslims, the Kemalists saw them as following a backward, anti-modern and uncivilised version of Islam.⁵

Part II describes the counter-hegemonic rise of Islamist populism under Erdoğan's AKP. Yilmaz discusses the political ascendancy of the AKP in three different phases: the rise of the AKP as a Muslim democrat party (1997-2008), its gradual shift to authoritarianism (2008-2013) and its transition to a "full authoritarianist Erdoğanist" regime from mid-2013 onwards.⁶ After analysing the AKP, Yilmaz draws his attention to the phenomenon of Erdoğanism. He describes Erdoğanism as an ad-hoc ideology based on the "actions and rhetoric of Erdoğan and his supporters."⁷ Erdoğanism is driven by three main characteristics: Islamism, populism and neo-patrimonialism with an anti-secular, anti-Kemalist and anti-Western posture.⁸ Erdoğan's counter-hegemonic Islamist ideology is well-contextualised throughout the book as antagonism towards the aggressive secularisation rhetoric and policies of Kemalism, which are framed as a threat to Turkey's culture, Muslimness and Ottoman past.⁹ Various examples are used to illustrate Islamist resentment towards Kemalists, including the headscarf ban, shutting down of Islamist parties, Erdoğan's four month imprisonment and the refusal by secular elites to accept Abdullah Gül's presidency because his wife wore a headscarf.¹⁰

Part III of the book turns to Erdoğan's social engineering strategies in creating his desired citizens. This section refers to various speeches made by Erdoğan that envision his ideal of creating a pious modern youth. Yilmaz writes:

Erdoğanists do not openly express that they have a desired citizen creation project. However, they have a different name for it: *Dindar Nesil*, the pious generation. Erdoğan has consistently argued that it is the state's duty to raise a religious generation. For at least the last decade, the AKP has been using many apparatuses of the state as well as the media, popular culture and Erdoğanist educational foundations to raise this generation that is not only religious but also staunchly Erdoğanist.¹¹

These chapters analyse Erdoğan's financial capital, business networks, Islamist civil society donations and Islamisation of Imam Hatip schools as part of a mass social engineering project. Regarding the education sector, Yilmaz notes the AKP increased its education budget significantly in 2018, along with Islamised school curriculums from Islamist organisations funded by Erdoğan's businessmen.¹² A separate chapter is dedicated to Erdoğan's social engineering in popular media, drama and entertainment.¹³ In analysing Turkey's education system, school textbooks and popular media, Yilmaz finds common themes of ethno-centrism,

⁵ Ibid., 6, 11, 94.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid., 152-153.

⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁹ Ibid., 60, 138, 204.

¹⁰ Ibid., 125, 128-129, 141.

¹¹ Ibid., 159.

¹² Ibid., 185.

¹³ Ibid., 178.

stigmatisation of minorities and non-Sunni Muslims as part of an ethno-cultural construction of national identity.¹⁴

Erdoğan's pan-Islamism, Ottoman nostalgia and vision to be the leader of the *umma* is also discussed in part III. The section outlines Erdoğan's use of political symbolism in glorifying Turkey's Ottoman past. It closely examines Erdoğan's reopening of the Hagia Sophia (formally a Byzantine cathedral) from a museum into a mosque for prayer.¹⁵ Yilmaz describes the move as part of Erdoğan's "resentment against the Kemalists and the West" and "restorative nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire."¹⁶ Here, the imagery of Muslim worshippers prostrating in prayer at the Hagia Sophia is aptly captured in Yilmaz's book cover as a metaphor of Erdoğan's desired citizen. For Erdoğan, the ideal citizen is an image of himself.¹⁷ This citizen is not only subservient to God, but also to Erdoğan. Chapter 9 explains this phenomenon as part of Erdoğan's personality cult, consisting of his supporters and officials, who venerate him as a person with divine and Prophet-like attributes.¹⁸

Part IV identifies the undesired citizens under Erdoğan. These groups include "Kemalists, Atatürkists, leftists, liberals, socialists, disobedient practising Muslims, non-Muslims, Alevi and disloyal Kurds."¹⁹ Many of these undesired citizen categories overlap with the Kemalists, demonstrating the systematic exclusion and othering of minority groups.²⁰ Despite Erdoğan's favouritism towards practicing Muslims, Yilmaz adds that members of the faith-based Gülen Movement, Islamist groups, liberal Muslims, Kurds and Alevi are targeted and projected as threats to the state.²¹

The final section discusses the Diyanet's (Presidency of Religious Affairs) subservient role to the state. The Diyanet controls and appoints all mosques and imams in Turkey. Yilmaz breaks the Diyanet into two consecutive periods: Diyanet 1.0 under the Kemalists and Diyanet 2.0 under the Erdoğanists. He argues that the Kemalists were able to neutralise practicing Muslims in creating what he calls a "liminal citizen category of tolerated citizens."²² Initially, this category moulded Sunni Muslims into state-friendly and loyal servants of the Turkish state, its military and Atatürk. However, as political lines shifted with the arrival of the AKP so did its control over the Diyanet. Yilmaz labels the latter shift as Diyanet 2.0, which embraces similar aspects of the former, but with a renewed Islamist narrative and rhetoric based on reviving *jihad* as an armed struggle, re-unifying the *umma*, defence of the nation and glorification of martyrdom.²³ In analysing numerous state-scripted sermons of the Diyanet,

¹⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵ Ibid., 145-148.

¹⁶ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷ Ibid., 124, 165.

¹⁸ Ibid., 169-171.

¹⁹ Ibid., 200.

²⁰ Ibid., 186-187.

²¹ Ibid., 204-208.

²² Ibid., 262.

²³ Ibid., 257-258.

Yilmaz illustrates the conflation of nationalist causes with pan-Islamist ideals about reviving the *umma*; martyrdom, *jihad* and solidarity with Palestine.²⁴

Yilmaz's observations of the Diyanet are noteworthy and can be contrasted with other works depicting it as an "*ulama*-state alliance."²⁵ While there is mutual benefit to this alliance for state-sponsored *ulama* (religious scholars), Yilmaz holds the Diyanet remains subservient to "the state's high politics."²⁶ To use a gambling analogy, Yilmaz's observations show that "the house always wins," meaning the state will always win more than it concedes to the *ulama*. From this perspective, the state will always dictate the type of Islam propagated, whether it is pro-Islamist, pro-secular or otherwise through its state machinery and propaganda tools.

A core strength of the book is Yilmaz's ability to analyse Kemalists and Erdoğanists with equal scrutiny. The book draws extensively on primary sources, empirical literature and content analysis to inform readers about key historical–political developments and ideological fault-lines between secularists, nationalists and Islamists. As a result, Yilmaz extracts profound insights into how Kemalists and Erdoğanists employ near-identical tactics to create their desired citizens.²⁷ These include social engineering projects, authoritarian tactics, use of state institutions such as the Diyanet, militarism, nationalistic sentiments, love of homeland (*vatan*), Turkification of minority groups and conspiracy theories involving the West.²⁸ As the book repeatedly demonstrates, these tactics are ideologically manufactured through their "own myths and history."²⁹

Readers may be inquisitive as to whether there is any momentum or cohesive oppositional movement formed by undesired citizens or existing political actors. The 2019 mayoral election victory of Ekrem Imamoglu in Istanbul is a case in point, ending 25 years of AKP rule in the city. In saying that, Yilmaz acknowledges in his conclusion that not everyone is "passive recipients of the state's plans."³⁰ He notes the existence of civil society actors and undesired citizens who have "access to new tools of resistance such as social media and international solidarity"³¹ with pro-human rights groups and activists. Yilmaz adds that the book does not cover the transnational aspect of Erdoğan's pursuit to create desired citizens in Turkish diaspora communities. He states these gaps can be "fruitful subjects for further studies."³²

These are only minor limitations in an otherwise compelling and rigorously crafted book that concretely dissects populist politics and authoritarianism in modern Turkey. Most impressively, Yilmaz's application of the desired citizen – as a homogenising social engineering project – enables lay readers, policy experts and observers to assess political

²⁴ Ibid, 250.

²⁵ Ahmet Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 42, 169.

²⁶ Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizen*, 27, 99-100.

²⁷ Ibid., 159.

²⁸ Ibid., 218.

²⁹ Ibid., 125.

³⁰ Ibid., 269.

³¹ Ibid., 265.

³² Ibid., 269.

systems, not just within Turkey, but across the global north and south with greater clarity and precision, particularly in relation to how populist leaders ideologically manoeuvre and manipulate democratic processes, strong arm state institutions, distribute propaganda, restrict civil society, securitise minorities and eliminate dissidents in their utopian pursuits of the ideal citizen.

Creating the Desired Citizen is of pertinent importance in today's political climate. It is an indispensable source for experts, academics, journalists, civil society actors, activists, students and intellectuals to learn about the shifting dynamics of state structures, ideological fault-lines and authoritarian politics. Readers will benefit significantly from the variety of viewpoints presented in the book, including its inter-disciplinary approach to international relations, Turkish history, politics, sociology and religious studies.

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