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What is This?

# Conceptualizing Islamic Movements: The Case of Turkey

Kayhan Delibas

Abstract. The September 11 atrocities brought Islamic movements to the attention of the world media. The events of this day also became a significant focus of academic analysis. However, media reports and most academic discussions have confused the reason for the existence of Islamic movements with the results of their extreme actions. Sociological analyses suggest that these movements have arisen as a response to diverse socioeconomic and political conditions aggravated by rapid urbanization and globalization. Characterizing Islamic movements as grounded in a religious-based antipathy to the Western world does not tell the full story. In this article, the Turkish Islamic movement will be used as a case study in order to shed light on the way in which Islamic movements emerge and develop.

*Keywords*: • Islamic movements • Globalization • Neoliberalism • Grassroots activism • Urbanization

## Introduction

Following 9/11, the international media and the public have become preoccupied with Islamic terrorism. The phrase "international terrorism" is now a synonym for Islam. International terrorism, and Islam by extension, are seen as the new "global devil" of the 21st century, replacing the communist "devil" of the Cold War era (Fuller, 2002). In a series of articles after the events of 9/11 Fuller (2002) asked: "Will sociology find some new concepts before the US finds Osama bin Laden?" Since then the US has not found Osama bin Laden and sociology has not developed a new conceptual framework to facilitate the study of Islamic movements, and to understand their causes and consequences across the Muslim world. Apart from recently emerging studies such as those of Castells (2004), Esposito and Burgat (2003), and Roy (2002), conventional conceptualizations point to individuals such Bin Laden or Atta, or to states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran,

or Syria, for the source of "hatred" of the West. Conventional studies, in general, then, have failed to fully grasp the true nature and contemporary characteristics of Islamic political movements.

It can be argued that the politics of fear have become a defining feature of public rhetoric in the post-9/11 era (Furedi, 2005). However, Islamic movements were viewed as a threat to the Western world and the Western way of life long before 9/11. What is new in the post-9/11 world is the politicization of the fear of terrorism. Islamic fundamentalism is often equated with international terrorism and the fear of terrorism makes it impossible to have an open, objective, and effective debate about the subject. It is important, therefore, that contemporary political and sociological studies take up the challenge of understanding the nature, contemporary characteristics, and driving forces of Islamist movements.

Islamic movements are often characterized as anti-modern or as driven by a pre-modern ideology posing a threat to the Western way of life. There is some truth to this, but this article suggests that these movements are not entirely driven by religious ideology or by hatred of Western civilization. Rather, they are a response to socioeconomic and political conditions that have been aggravated by rapid urbanization and the forces of economic globalization in many Muslim countries, Arab and non-Arab. To illustrate this, the structural conditions in which an Islamic movement emerged and gathered significant popular support in Turkey will be explored. After a short scene-setting paragraph, the article will discuss the relevance of social movement theory to Islamic movements. It will then analyze the discourse surrounding Islamic fundamentalism before and after 9/11 before turning to the Turkish case as an illustration of the wider drivers of Islamic radicalization. This discussion will be followed by concluding comments.

Over ten million people migrated from rural Anatolia (which comprises most of modern Turkey) to urban centers in the decade 1985–95 (Delibas, 2001). This migration was at a time of slow economic growth, high inflation and market in-stability and caused housing shortages, unemployment, and a sharp fall in working class income. The pro-Islamist Welfare Party (WP) and its successor, the Virtue Party (VP), adopted the rhetoric of social democracy to express the grievances of the urban poor. In a manner similar to other Islamist movements – such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt – the VP depicted itself as a strong critic of the growing economic inequalities and the lack of basic services in the *gecekondus* (urban squatter settlements). In 2001, when the VP was banned, some of its members moved to the newly founded, pro-Islamist, Justice and Development Party (AKP). In the 2002 general election, the mainstream center-right and center-left parties lost popular support and the AKP emerged as the main political force, forming all governments from that point.

It can be said that the relationships between movements and parties are usually intricate, with borders between them rarely defined. The Turkish Islamic movement was transformed into a political party, the National Salvation Party (NSP), in 1972 but the movement was not totally dissolved. It remained alive in part as a result of receiving support from a wide range of Islamic sects, orders (or *tariqats*), solidarity networks, and civil society organizations which, nonetheless, retained their autonomy and independent existences. In times of crisis, for example when parties were banned by the military dictatorship, the movement secured the continuity of the Islamist political agenda. At this point, though, we

must distinguish between "Islamic fundamentalism" and "political Islam," and this distinction can best be made by reference to social movement analysis.

## Social Movement Theory and Islamic Movements

Social movements are a key feature of modern and post-industrial societies. From a structural-functionalist perspective they are defined as "collective attempts to restore, protect or create values [or norms] in the name of a generalised belief" (Smelser, 1962: 313, cited in Pakulski, 1991: xiv). In this manner, they are seen as a reaction to rapid social change. Pakulski defines them as "recurrent patterns of collective activities which are partially institutionalized, value oriented and anti-systemic in their form and symbolism" (1991: xiv). On the other hand, for Scott (1995: 6) a "social movement is a collective actor constituted by individuals who understand themselves to have common interests and ... a common identity." For him they are distinguished from conventional political actors by their use or threat of use of mass mobilization. Della Porta and Dian (1999: 16) define social movements – and, in particular, their political component – "as (1) informal networks, based (2) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about (3) confliction issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest." It must be said that most of these definitions imply "old" social movements which are commonly viewed as a class-based social phenomenon representing the struggle for power and control over the organization of living conditions (Haferkamp and Smelser, 1992: 16). The "new" social movements, then, are the common phenomenon of post-industrial societies. According to Tourine and Eyerman "the new social movements have great potential for shaping the future of modern societies" (1992: 17), and Islamic movements can be categorized as new social movements.

Sutton and Vertigans (2006: 101) show that Islamic movements have only recently become the subject of serious study. They point out that recent volumes on social movements (Crossley, 2002; Della Porta and Dian, 1999; McAdam et al., 1996) make no mention of Islamic movements, while Goodwin and Jasper's collection (2003) contains only one contribution on Islam. Tarrow (1998) identifies Islamic fundamentalism as one of three "translational social movements" but does not develop this characterization further. Neither Maheu's (1995) nor Scott's (1995) texts on social movements make mention of Islamic movements. Pakulski's (1991) introduction mentions the revival of Muslim fundamentalism as a challenge to the Western-centrism inherent in the dominant analytical approaches, but does not pursue this further.

Islamic movements are categorized in many different ways, with overlapping themes evident among them. Karawan (1997), for instance, categorizes them as either militant or political movements; El-Said (1995) labels them as pragmatic and ideological; Ghadbian (1997) considers them in terms of their degree of radicalism or moderateness; Zubaida (2001) categorizes them as conservative, radical, and political, Eickelman (2000) as reformist and traditional, Halliday (1995a: 47–8) as social and political movements. What makes them "political" is not just the context in which they arise and the language they use, but their goals and the means they use to achieve those goals (Halliday, 1995b: 402). Since the 1990s Muslim countries from Algeria to Turkey have witnessed the power of Islamic activists in electoral politics. Islamic activism has demonstrated its diversity,

complexity, and popular appeal as a social and political movement since this time (Esposito and Burgat, 2003).

During the 1980s, Islamic movements were often described as anti-modernist, supported by fundamentalist groups living in a bygone age, isolated from the rest of the modern world. In the early 1990s, this discourse began changing and they came to be described as fundamentalist and a threat to the Western world. However, like many other sociological concepts, the concept of fundamentalism has been rather problematic. Its application to Islam has generated wide criticism. The term is often seen as accusatory, especially in the popular media, where it is used pejoratively. For some scholars the fundamentalist label is tantamount to moral and cultural condemnation (Furedi, 1995). For Campo (1995) and Juergensmeyer (1993) it reflects an attitude toward other people more than it describes them. For this reason, the term "political Islam" will be used throughout this article.

## Classifying the Turkish Islamic Movement

The Turkish Islamic movement emerged as a popular grassroots organization of the urban poor in conditions similar to those giving rise to Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan. It has, therefore, a strongly political orientation and, using Casanova's (1994: 61) definition, we can conceptualize political Islam also as a manifestation of "public religion." Although the rise of the Welfare Party (WP) and later the Virtue Party (VP) has been identified as marking the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, neither the leading cadres nor the majority of its voters appeared to be religious extremists or fundamentalists. In contrast to other Islamic movements, the leaders of Turkish Islamic politics (Necmettin Erbakan and his associates) are situated in the professional and business strata and do not have a clerical background (Heper, 1997: 35). Erbakan, for instance, graduated from a German university and is a professor of engineering. Furthermore, in contrast to other Islamic movements, the tradition of the National Salvation Party (NSP)–WP and the AKP has not produced original Islamic thinkers such as Jamal al Din al-Afghani or Ayatollah Khomeioni (Çakır, 1994: 126–7). Political Islam in Turkey has been evolving constantly as a consequence of the modernization and secularization process that has been ongoing since the 1920s.

Göle's conceptualization of Islamic movements takes this complexity into account. She argues that they are "not solely a reaction to a given situation of class and cultural domination, but also present a counter-cultural model of modernity, and a new paradigm for self-definition that has led to the formation of Islamic counter-elites" (1997: 53). For Göle (1997: 54), "Islamism, both in its ideological formations and sociological practices, has created new hybridizations between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, community and religion." She contends that these new agents of change represent the move of Islam from the periphery of the system to its center, and yet "were themselves a product of that centre, of its educational institutions and its urban life" (1997: 54).

What this hybridization process tells us is that the identification of the leaders of the WP/VP as Islamist fundamentalists is not an accurate one. In addition, the expansion of communication and education in today's global society has increased the power of religious intellectuals. Increasingly these intellectuals

have become a trans-national elite (Eickelman, 2000). They represent what some scholars call "multiple modernities" in Muslim societies (Eickelman, 2000; Eisenstadt, 2000; Göle, 2000). This point will be further discussed shortly, but for now it is important to take account of the perceptions of Islamic movements before 9/11. The next section will briefly summarize and analyze some of the common responses to the events of 9/11 by various agencies, academics, journalists, and commentators.

## The Discourse Surrounding Islamic Fundamentalism before 9/11

Throughout the 1990s, many influential scholars, among them Huntington (1993, 1998) and Lewis (1990), described Islamic fundamentalism as a threat to the West. These scholars in particular have been very influential in American intellectual and policy circles and have shaped the parameters of discourse on Islamic fundamentalism (Esposito, 1995: 195; Halliday, 1996). They assume that Islam posed a three-dimensional threat to the West: political, civilizational, and demographic. Huntington argued that most important conflicts occur between cultures: "The fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed" (1993: 25). According to Huntington, modernization has resulted in the disappearance of local identities and this gap has been filled by religion. In this context Islamic fundamentalism has emerged as a process of "re-Islamization" of the Middle East (Huntington, 1993: 26). For him this re-Islamization, or Islamic fundamentalism, seeks to shape the world in a non-Western way.

In a similar vein, Lewis (1990: 49) viewed the Islamic world as an entity with a "deeply rooted rage" toward the West, especially to the United States as the leader of the Western world. Lewis begins his discussion with the statement that "there is no Cuba, no Vietnam in the Muslim world, but there is a Libya, an Iran and a Lebanon and an increase of hostility raises alarm bells for the Americans" (1990: 49). For him the hostility of Muslims toward the West becomes the "rejection of Western civilisation" and because Islamic revivalist leaders describe their enemies as the enemies of God, this hostility and rejection of Western civilization will persist for a long time (1990: 51–2). Both Huntington and Lewis view this conflict through a historical lens as a continuity of aggression, hatred, and violence of Islamic fundamentalism toward the Christian West. The discourse of Islamic threat is not confined to the West – there are many parallels between the "threat to the West" approach in the West and some of the approaches to political Islam in Turkey (Kongar, 2000; Selçuk, 1996; Tanilli, 1996). Some analyses of the 2002 and 2007 general election results, in which the AKP assumed control of government, are based on this "threat" view. This discourse was also identifiable in media comment on global relations. For example, a 1990 article in the *Sunday Times* claimed that "every month the threat from the Warsaw Pact diminishes but every year, for the rest of this decade and beyond, the threat from the fundamentalist Islam will grow." For Willi Claes "Muslim fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as communism once was."[1]

For some scholars Islamic fundamentalism emerged as a reaction to modernity. This approach views political Islam as "an atavism, a rejection of modernity and the Western way of life" (Seyyed, 1995: 121–39). Islamists are often viewed as "fossilised relics, insulated from and oblivious to their surroundings, living

perpetually in a bygone age" (Caplan, 1987: 5). Abrahamin (1991:102) argues that "for radicals, [Islamic fundamentalism] conjures up the image of theological obscurantism, political atavism, and the rejection of science, history, modernity, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution." The Turkish anti-modernist discourse contains similar views (Kongar, 2000; Yücekök, 1997). This common view has only recently been challenged by some of the social movement theorists mentioned above. Nevertheless, it still dominates the discourse. However, as Ray (1999: 205) noted, Islamic movements share many essential aspects of rhetoric and organizational style with the modernist, Jacobin social imagination (Eickelman, 2000; Eisenstadt, 2000; Göle, 2000). Some commentators (Akbar, 1992; Gülalp, 1995) go so far as to describe Islamic movements as a postmodern condition.

## The Discourse on Islamic Fundamentalism after 9/11

The 9/11 suicide-hijackings have been described as "the worst international terrorist attack ever."[2] As indicated in the previous section, Islamic fundamentalism was already labeled as the main threat to the West, even before the events of 9/11. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim world has become the focal point of unprecedented media coverage. For many commentators the Islamic threat mooted by Huntington had finally materialized. The events were seen as convincing evidence that the Islamic threat had now replaced the threat of communism, the "red menace" of the Cold War era (Esposito, 1995).

The 9/11 atrocities committed by Islamist terrorists created a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment and public rage. This anti-Islamic sentiment was so intense that some observers termed it Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Gumbel (2002) reports that immediately after 9/11 security agencies from North America to Western Europe began to question thousands of migrants, mostly Arabs and Muslims, many of them detained for minor crimes. In Europe and North America hundreds of Muslims – even Sikhs – were subjected to attacks. Mosques and Muslim schools across the US were set alight; worshippers were threatened or beaten up by agitated groups (Herbert and Burrell, 2002), and Islamophobia was reported in EU countries.[3]

There was also increased media reporting of open anti-Arab/Muslim sentiment on the street. As CNN reported:

> Graffiti on a wall near a mosque in South Shields, northeast England, confirms a chilling reaction to last week's terrorist atrocities in New York and Washington. "Avenge U.S.A." is the scrawled message in red paint. "Kill a Muslim now." Terrorism in the United States has prompted an upsurge in anti-Muslim attacks all over Europe.[4]

What the CNN report shows is that the 9/11 event caused widespread anxieties, deep inter-communal division, and even ethnic, religious violence. Street level reactions and expressions of Islamophobia can be understood in this context. What was not expected was the heavy handed response of governments. Across Europe and North America governments took draconian measures, passing laws that arguably undermined civil liberties. Britain, which has long been proud of its place as the cradle of modern democracy, opted out of the European Human Rights Convention so that it could detain terror suspects indefinitely without trial. As the *Observer* reported in 2002: "In a historic initiative Britain is to be placed

under a state of 'public emergency' as part of an unprecedented governmental move to allow internment without trial of suspected terrorists."

With the events of 9/11, Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis gained new prominence. Although Western leaders have declared that the war on global terrorism has nothing to do with the clash of civilizations, the strategies and actions they have been taking have alienated moderate Muslim opinion and have shifted the ground toward Islamic extremism. More worryingly, moderate political forces have been pushed aside by both sides of the confrontation, leading to radicalization of the whole Middle East region. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the deaths of many hundreds of civilians, along with the humiliating pictures of Iraqi prisoners from Abu Ghraib, support the arguments of the radicals. From the Arab/Muslim perspective, the enormity of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with all that it entails in terms of infrastructural destruction and human suffering, is increasingly viewed as part of the anti-Muslim/Arab trend that can be found in many countries, including non-Western ones. The declaration of war against international terrorism has given China and Russia, for instance, the opportunity to mistreat their Muslim minorities without fear of international criticism (MacAskill et al., 2001).

Since 9/11, then, there has been a growing body of literature on and media coverage of Islamic fundamentalism. However, the vast majority of this literature has focused on the "Muslim hatred" or "rage" against Western civilization. In this vein the 9/11 events have been interpreted as an Islamic *jihad* to destroy Western civilization, freedom, and democracy. The rhetoric is a simple binary – "them" and "us" – indicating the limitations of these writers in dealing with one of the most complicated problems of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, there is little intention to understand the driving forces of Islamist movements and explain how the world came to 9/11. Rather this approach is a self-fulfilling prophecy, fueling radicalism and extremism among Islamic groups and spreading fear about the Muslim world in the West.

In search of an answer to this so-called "deep-rooted hatred of America," Zakaria (2001: 1–12) ventures to suggest that: "They [Islamists] come out of a culture that reinforces their hostility, distrust and hatred of the West – and of America in particular." He adds: "We stand for freedom and they hate it. We are rich and they envy us. We are strong and they resent this. All of which is true. But there are billions of poor and weak and oppressed people around the world. They don't turn planes into bombs" (2001: 1). Zakaria rightly argues that poverty on its own is not the cause of Islamist terrorism. Nevertheless, poverty is one of the major forces contributing to political mobilization, though not necessarily to political terrorism. For Zakaria the Islamic culture not only condones terrorism but fuels the fanaticism that is at its heart. In other words, Islam and Islamic culture are blamed for their embedded hatred of the West and America. This wholesale approach to an entire culture and religion does not reflect the majority of Muslim opinion. It is divisive and plays into the hands of extremist religious groups such Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which are unrepresentative of the Muslim world. Yet, Zakaria's view reflects a recently growing trend among intellectuals to take a black-and-white approach to this issue. However, Islamic fundamentalism is not necessarily the root cause of terrorism. Nor is terrorism, especially suicide terrorism, confined to a specific religion or political ideology. Pape's remarkable study of 462 suicide bombings shows that there is not a close connection

between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. "Rather," he says, "what nearly all suicide terrorist campaigns have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider being their homeland" (Pape, 2006). Thus, the indiscriminate categorization of Islamic movements as Islamic terrorism, Islamic fanaticism, or international terrorism misses the root causes of the problem.

## The Perils of a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

This problematic conceptualization of the purported Islamist threat as "them" against "us" has the perils of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since 9/11 many non-Islamist civic and political vehicles for the expression of discontent have been perceived as threats to national security (*The Guardian*, September 2, 2003). Similarly, Crawford (2002) points out the hazards of the US pre-emptive strike policy: "as the United States creates a pre-emptive strike environment, U.S. planners will also know that potential adversaries, fearing the loss of their weapons, will have an incentive to strike first. ... Thus, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the United States will feel even greater pressure to pre-empt." It seems this pre-emption strategy has developed as part of a growing culture of fear in which a culture of precaution has become the code of practice in many areas of social life as well as in foreign policy. The fear of terrorism feeds the myth of Islamic terrorism, and does this by creating fear, panic, insecurity, and above all propaganda which benefits terrorist groups (Modood, 2001). Yet, "Islamic hatred" and "rage toward the West" are not the driving forces of Islamic movements. It can be argued that there is an inseparable connection between deepened poverty on a global scale and increased political radicalism all around the Muslim world. However, since 9/11 this form of commentary has been widely absent from the world media. Instead, vast sections have been concentrating on the *jihad* versus crusade form of discourse.

Although there are Islamic groups that have adopted terrorism, it would equally be misleading to brand them all as terrorist organizations or view them all through this prism. Significant numbers of Islamist movements do not fit this stereotype, preferring to adopt relatively moderate political strategies. It is also important to keep in mind that in terms of ideology, organizational structure, and policy aims these movements are diverse and wide ranging. This point brings us to the second objective of this article – to offer an explanation, based on empirical data, for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey and, by extension, across the Muslim world. It is the first systematic study of an Islamist movement/party in a Muslim country. The findings provide a window through which to view and analyze Islamic movements in other Muslim countries.

## Turkey: Globalization, Inequalities, and the Rise of Islamic Movements

Since the early 1980s Turkey has experienced mass migration accompanied by high levels of unemployment and inflation, and rampant corruption. While urbanization began in the 1950s, the process was accelerated with the political adoption of an economic privatization program on the basis of International Monetary Fund restructuring projects in the 1980s (Danielson and Keleş, 1985; Hirst and Thompson, 1996). As a result of the implementation of neoliberal

restructuring policies, especially the privatization of public companies, millions of workers lost their jobs, wage-earners experienced a drop of over 50 percent in real income, and the GDP contribution of the agricultural sector (employing 43 percent of the workforce) fell from 28 to 14 percent. The *gecekondu* (slum) areas expanded as a consequence of intensified rural migration to the cities. By 1995 it was estimated that 10 million people (35 percent of the total urban population) lived in *gecekondu* areas (Kongar, 2000: 566), and faced unemployment and poverty, poor housing, and inadequate schooling and health services. These economic and social outcomes, affecting the most vulnerable groups in society, reflect the fact that most governments failed to solve the country's serious socioeconomic problems. In addition, successive governments have also been unable to construct a democratic solution to the Kurdish question which has bedeviled Turkish politics for decades. Over time, the public became progressively disillusioned with both center-left and center-right governing parties, opening a political space for the emergence of an alternative political voice appealing to the urban poor. The Welfare Party (WP) emerged in this context, replacing the banned National Salvation Party (NSP) in 1983 as the voice of political Islamism.

Public support for the WP was manifest for the first time in 1987, when it won a modest 7.5 percent of the vote, rising to 9.8 percent in the 1989 local elections.[5] At this time, the Turkish party system was highly fragmented on both left and right. In the 1994 local elections, the WP emerged as a significant political force, winning 19.1 percent of the vote. In the general election the following year (1995), the WP won 21.4 percent of the vote, and formed a government with the center-right secularist party, True Path Party (TPP), which lasted for a year. While in government, the WP came into increasing conflict with the military and was charged with anti-secular activities. This resulted in the party being banned in 1998 by the Supreme Court for violating the principle of secularism and breaking the rules governing political parties. Its place in the political spectrum was quickly filled by the Virtue Party (VP), which garnered 15.5 percent support in the 1999 general election. The VP suffered the same fate as the WP, and was banned for anti-secular activities in 2001. Within the VP, a struggle for power had taken place between progressive and conservative factions. The successor Islamist party, the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (or AK Parti) (the Justice and Development Party), was founded by the progressive wing, under the leadership of ex-Istanbul Mayor Recep T. Erdogan.

In order to explain the consistent rise in support for pro-Islamist parties, one needs to look at the relationship they have set out to forge with particular sections of Turkish society. The pro-Islamist WP/VP emerged from the 1980s onward as the champion of the poor, uprooted migrants of the *gecekondu* and the lower middle class. It developed socioeconomic policies that voiced the concerns of the urban underclasses, artisans, merchants, and small shopkeepers. From the early days of its founding, the WP, and its successors, made ingenious use of the traditional religious networks and cultural resources, tapping into deep-rooted solidarity organizations that had survived for many generations. In discourse, for example, WP activists used the language of Islam in their everyday interactions, corresponding with the daily vocabulary of local communities. Their use of references to God (Allah), his Prophet, or other religious persona, and their citation of passages from the Koran, resonated with the belief system of shanty town residents. This also reconfigured the traditional political culture, especially in relation to religious issues, social justice, and equality, and was

articulated through the party's "Just Order" socioeconomic policies. Its successor party, the VP, was later to appropriate this culture in "Just Society" policies putting a greater emphasis on Islamic brotherhood.

The WP/VP, then, voiced demands for equality, justice, and democracy for the millions of urban poor badly affected by the neoliberal agenda promoted by the globalization process. As the neoliberal restructuring policies undermined Turkey's economy, the urban poor became increasingly politicized and sought to protest against this process. The pro-Islamist WP/VP emerged as the champion of the urban poor and disaffected. It sought to fill the gap left by the decline of the centre-left RPP in the 1990s and the failure by successive center-left and center-right parties to address the economic crisis and hold on to electoral support. The WP/VP, with its vast and well-organized grassroots organizations, emerged as the major winner in the reconfiguration of Turkish politics. Support for the party doubled from 15 percent in 1999 to 34 percent in 2002, when it won 64 percent of parliamentary seats.

It must be noted, though, that Turkey's Islamist party does not aim to build a modern welfare state in its championing of justice and equality. Nor has it developed redistributive income or taxation policies. Since coming to government in 2002, the Islamic party AKP has mostly taken palliative steps to address income inequality, unemployment, and poverty. These measures have taken the form of organizing charity work, distributing coal in winter, and donating occasional food rations in the poorest neighbourhoods (Milliyet, 2007). The party's poverty-alleviation strategies are more similar to Victorian-style charity than to modern welfare provision. In 2006 the committee created within the State Planning Office to develop poverty reduction policies suggested that they might utilize *zekat* (alms) as one means of poverty reduction (*Sabah*, 2006). Obviously, alms or charity work will not be enough to reduce poverty and bring about justice and equality, but these modest and conservative measures make the AKP more appealing than its rivals. This is because other parties do not have any alternative welfare policy suggestions or any charity activities to match those of the Islamist party.

## The Role of Grassroots Activism

It has been argued that Islamist party activists combine different strategies and tactics to win people's hearts and minds and then their votes. Actually, this dimension is very important. As one interviewee asserted, grassroots activists live among the people. "They are not like other parties that knock the door only in election times, but are always with the people." Their activism is a year-round activity. They visit households on all social occasions and offer help in times of crisis, showing solidarity, compassion, and sympathy. The provision of material benefits is the primary activity (37 percent) of the VP's neighbourhood committees. These benefits include the supply of food, coal, clothing, bursaries for school children, health care and medical aid, assisting people to find jobs, or solving problems in the government offices, reflecting the dire socioeconomic conditions of the urban poor.

It appears that grassroots activists effectively combine social work and political activism. Due to their community work the activists are viewed as compassionate people, sincerely caring about the problems of their local community and acting as spokespersons for that community when engaging with officialdom. With this combination of social work and a caring image, the WP/VP has been elevated to

the level of "a messiah in the making." A social worker is just a social worker but an Islamic activist is a social worker as well as an agent who, it is believed, can change everything through governmental means.

It can be argued that the human face of politics and political parties is represented by grassroots organizations. One of the advantages of a large and active grassroots organization is the ability to go out and engage with the electorate – not just the party members but ordinary citizens who may or may not vote for the party but who can contact others and spread the party's propaganda. During election campaigns one-to-one meetings and door-to-door canvassing can be invaluable, and Islamic grassroots members are well positioned to undertake this activity. In addition, party activism becomes much more important where there is a weakening of partisan attachments and a high level of electoral volatility, such as are prevalent in Turkey. Finally, one of the most important characteristics of the WP/VP is that it combines both modern and traditional means of communication. In very few areas can the mixture of modern and traditional be used so effectively to create such a positive political result.

## Conclusions

The politicization of Islam, the spread of Islamic ideology, and the growth of Islamist movements are key areas to be explored more widely. As Innes (2001) argued, there is an urgent need in the post-9/11 world for social scientists to use analytical tools to explain the rise in popularity of Islamist movements, given that the governmental response has largely concentrated on surveillance and social control. Furthermore, the use of military force as a response to the political mobilization of Islamic sentiment in Afghanistan and Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon has not solved the acute socioeconomic and political problems of the Middle East.

This point seems to be now more openly acknowledged by one of the key proponents of the military force strategy. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently acknowledged that "the use of force alone had alienated Muslim opinion, and there is now an arch of extremism stretching across the Middle East and beyond" (*The Times*, August 2, 2006). It is apparent that he realized the unworkable strategy of a "war on terror." Military force does not solve such complex and multidimensional problems. Instead, it is exploited by extremist, radical Islamic groups and fuels terrorism. For Blair, the West must address issues such as poverty, climate change, and trade, but above all "[we must] bend every sinew of our will to making peace between Palestine and Israel" (*The Times*, August 2, 2006).

With the exception of a few Islamic organizations (such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic Jihad), Islamic movements are not driven by religious zealotry, bigotry, or hatred of the West or the US. In most cases, they are organizations reacting against the consequences of globalization, neoliberal capitalism, political problems, and the lack of accountability and democracy in Muslim countries, and they are not terrorist in nature.

Labeling political Islam as "extremist", "fanaticism," "fundamentalist," or "international terrorism" does not help commentators, sociologists, political analysts, or policymakers to grasp the conditions in which these movements have emerged and are rapidly spreading. Instead, it obstructs the possibility of a realistic and workable counterstrategy. What we have been seeing since the 1990s with the rise of political Islam are the symptoms. The prime objective of further

social science research should be to find out the root causes, the driving forces of these movements.

The Islamic movement in Turkey shows that it was grassroots activism rather than religious fundamentalism that led to the ascendancy of political Islam to power in the 1990s. The WP/VP as a modern mass party made its way into government not by simply being Islamic fundamentalists, nor by exploiting religious values and rhetoric, but by winning the hearts and minds of millions of voters with its effective and efficient election campaigns, carried out by its local party organizations. It has been observed that party organizations and grassroots activists are highly influential in improving the party's electoral fortunes.

It seems there is a clear repetitive pattern emerging across the Middle East. In a recent article, Ali (2006: 18–19) noted that:

> New forces and faces are emerging that have something in common. Muqtada, Haniya, Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad: each has risen by organizing the urban poor in their localities – Baghdad and Basra, Gaza and Jenin, Beirut and Sidon, Tehran and Shiraz. It is in the slums that Hamas, Hizbollah, the Sadr brigades and the Basij have their roots. The contrast with the Hariris, Chalabis, Karzais, Allawis, on whom the West relies – overseas millionaires, crooked bankers, CIA bagmen – could not be starker.

Although the Turkish Islamist movement (and leadership) is more moderate than some of the Islamic movements and leaders that Ali mentions, the pattern is quite similar. It is the urban poor who support, by and large, these movements and leaders; they are entirely a grassroots movement rooted in the slums of rapidly expanding cities. In Turkey, the leader of the governing party, Recep Tayip Erdogan, rose from organizing the urban poor to become the Mayor of Istanbul in the mid-1990s and then came to prime ministerial office in the 2002 general elections.

It can finally be said that, contrary to common perceptions, Islamic movements are part and parcel of the continuing "multiple modernities" process influenced by the expansion of education, communication, and rapid urbanization. The movements have usually emerged as a reaction against the failures of modernizing, often undemocratic, states, perceived as corrupt and unable to solve socioeconomic problems. They can be seen as urban-based, and part of a rapidly growing "anti-globalization" movement under an Islamic veil. Any alternative to these Islamist movements has to deal with the destructive consequences of globalization and the impacts of neoliberal economic policies, including inequality, poverty, unemployment, and lack of housing, health care, and schooling. In addition, they will have to offer real solutions to the political problems: lack of accountability, lack of democracy, and corruption in the Muslim world.

## Notes

1. Cited in the Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia* (1997: 9).
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3. European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, URL (consulted September 2003): http://eumc.eu.int/eumc/material/pub/112001/Initial-Report-041001.pdf.
4. CNN, "Muslims targets in terror backlash," URL (consulted September 2002): http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/09/19/gen.muslim.attacks/index.html.

5. For a brief introduction to Turkey's Islamist political parties, see URL (consulted 27 July 2008): http://meria.biu.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a4.html.

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## Biographical Note

Kayhan Delibas is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at Adnan Menderes University, Turkey. He is also an honorary research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent. His current research interests revolve around Islamic fundamentalism, political parties, political participation, grassroots activism, Islamist parties in Turkey, and theories of secularization. He directs a project on "The Risk Society, Trust and Rumours: a sociological analysis of eartquake-related rumours" (TUBITAK 107K230). Address: Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi, Fen-Edb. Fakultesi, Sosyoloji Bölümü, 09100, Aydın, Turkey [email: k.delibas@kent.ac.uk, alternatively kdelibas@adu.edu.tr].