Islam Unfettered, Control Retained: The 2012 Educational Reform in Turkey

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Reforms in 2012 extended the role of Islam in Turkey’s educational system, but the state’s control over religion was not diminished, nor was the Alevi minority granted greater recognition. This article outlines the republican history of religious education in Turkey, examines the changes to the status of religion effected by educational reforms, and discusses continuing change in the state-secularism discourse, which in Turkey amounts to state control of religion. In conclusion, I will briefly assess the future of religious education in Turkey, particularly in light of the results of the parliamentary election on 1 November 2015.

State Secularism in Turkey: Control of Religion

There is no universal, historically consistent, neutral understanding of religion or secularism. Indeed, as they should be approached as discourses there is no need to define them in general.

Neither religion nor secularism is neutral or represents any ‘natural’ order of things. Nor are religion and secularism discrete by any means; instead, they interact with each other. Both depend on the context in which they are examined.

This article is not a comprehensive description of secularism and religion in Turkey, but it aims to provide an insight into the state’s view on the multidimensional phenomena of secularism and religion in the Turkish educational system.
Secularism is part of Kemalism, the founding ideology of the republic established in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. References to Islam were removed from the Turkish constitution in 1924 and references to secularism added in 1937. Although the concept was adopted from France,¹ Turkish secularism has always been different from the French variety. In particular, state secularism in Turkey does not separate the state and religion, but rather implies strict state control of religion in the public sphere.

One example of how the state started to control religion was through the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Diyanet), in 1924. The Diyanet is a separate state office for religious affairs under the Prime Minister’s Office.² Religious affairs – for example, the administrative aspects of Friday prayers, organizing Quran courses and hiring imams – are under the Diyanet’s supervision.

Religious education in schools is supervised by the education ministry, Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB), established in 1923. This article encompasses religious education controlled by the MEB in the compulsory educational system, not that under the auspices of the Diyanet.

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¹ State secularism in Turkey is called laïklik, and it refers to French laïcité.
² The Diyanet is a highly influential directorate. For example, in 2015 its budget was one of the biggest of any directorate under the Prime Minister’s Office.
Religious Education in the National Educational System

The Turkish educational system is strongly centralized in terms of the curriculum, school finances, staff employment and examinations. The MEB determines all curricula and approves school textbooks, giving the state strict control of educational affairs in general and religious education in particular. Since the establishment of the republic, the educational models have included a complete lack of religious education at one time and elective religious education at another. Since 1982, however, despite the restrictions on religion in the public sphere, religious education has been a compulsory part of the educational system.

Compulsory religious education stems from the military-ruled government that came to power following a coup in 1980. Although the Turkish military defines itself as a secular institution, which protects the secular legacy of Atatürk, it introduced compulsory state-defined and supervised religious education. To create a common, unifying Turkish-Islamic identity to address divisions within the nation without jeopardizing the republic’s secular base, the government changed the school curricula to include compulsory lessons on religious culture and ethics, *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi* (DKAB).

The DKAB lessons focus on Sunni Islam, organized into the domains (öğrenme alanları) of faith/belief (*inanç*³), serving Allah (*ibadet*⁴), the Prophet Mohammed, the Quran, ethics and culture. The curriculum touches on the other religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism. The lessons began in the fourth grade and continue until the end of high school, but many of the 2012 reforms focused on the status of religion in fourth to eighth grades, as does this article.

AKP and CHP: Same Control, Different Aims

The questionable juxtaposition between Islamists and secularists in Turkish society is often expressed in terms of the country’s two largest parties, with the former perceived as being embodied in the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and the latter in the main opposition Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP).

The AKP defines itself as a conservative democratic party and has been in power since 2002, just a year after it was founded. The social-democratic CHP is the party of Atatürk and carries on his six ‘arrows’ of secularism/laicism, republicanism, reformism/revolutionarism, statism, nationalism and populism.

While the parties have disagreed about the headscarf question, for example, they are not divided over the principle of secularism, in the sense that both consider religion and secularism from the perspective of state control of religion. However, they do have different aims in mind for controlling religion: while the AKP is pursuing more visible and less restricted Islam, the CHP sees a less visible and more restricted role for Islam in the public sphere.

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³ The word *inanç* in Turkish is a more general term for belief and faith, while *iman* is an Arabic word that refers particularly to religious faith and belief.

⁴ The word *ibadet* in Turkish refers to prayers, pilgrimage and sacrifice, fasting and charity in order to serve Allah.
Despite their disagreements, both the AKP and CHP support the idea that the state controls religious education. Both party platforms uphold the constitutional stipulation of compulsory DKAB lessons. Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution from 1982 states that religious education has to be under the state’s supervision and control. From this point of view, state control of religion is not a new strategy used only by secularists.

**Status of Religion after the 2012 Educational Reform**

The AKP reformed the Turkish educational system in 2012. The reform extended the period of compulsory education from eight years to 12, divided into three four-year periods. After the reforms were announced, the CHP’s criticisms included that they amounted to an attempt by the AKP to reinforce its version of religiosity in the educational system (Reuters 2012).

Four examples illustrate how the reforms changed the status of Islam in the educational system: the elective religious lessons added to school curricula; the establishment of religious Imam Hatip schools; the wearing of the headscarf (*turban/başörtü*) by female students; and adding the DKAB subject to the examination required for admission to secondary school.

First, three elective religious courses were added to ordinary schools’ curricula: Basic Religious Information, Quran and Prophet Mohammed’s Life. Students can choose these lessons from fifth grade onwards.

The lessons concentrate on Sunni Islam, but from a much wider perspective than the mandatory DKAB lessons. The Basic Religious Information course includes themes such as people’s spirituality, which does not have a specific role in the DKAB curriculum. The Quran lessons concentrate on its message as well as on reading and memorizing it. The study of the Prophet Mohammed concentrates on his life story (including his family and social circle) and his example of a pious Muslim. These elective courses did not change the status of the DKAB lessons, which remain compulsory for all students.

Second, intermediate-level religious Imam Hatip schools were opened. These vocational schools have been controversial since their establishment in the early years of the republic. At first, they included both intermediate and secondary levels, but the former had been closed down until the 2012 reform. In addition to the same compulsory courses as ordinary schools, Imam Hatip schools require students to take compulsory courses on, for example, the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed’s life. The religious lessons concentrate on Sunni-Islam. In these schools, girls are allowed to wear the headscarf.

This brings us to the third reform. From September 2014, girls have been allowed to wear the headscarf at school from fifth grade onwards, whereas previously, they were allowed only in Imam Hatip schools. The headscarf debate has been going on in Turkey for many years, not only in relation to schoolgirls, but also in terms of the state-imposed restrictions on public servants and university students.

Fourth, DKAB was included in the subjects that students must take in the eighth grade in the Transition from Primary Education to Secondary Education System examination (TEOG), success in which is a prerequisite for entry into competitive high schools. This arrangement puts religious
minorities at a disadvantage, as they may have to learn about religion from a Sunni-Muslim perspective in order to get high scores. Although some minorities are exempt from DKAB, they are not offered a definite alternative test to take (Gürcan 2015, 11).

**Status of Alevism after the 2012 Educational Reform**

Only those non-Muslim minorities recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne can obtain permission not to attend the compulsory DKAB lessons. Other minorities that have asked for recognition in the educational system include the Alevi people, accounting for about 15–20% of the country’s 80 million inhabitants. Alevism is based on devotion to Ali, the fourth Caliph. Their practices differ from Sunni-Islam in that they do not fast during Ramadan, they do not pray five times a day and they do not attend mosques.

The Alevi have been unhappy with the mainstream provision of religious education. Students belonging to the minority have no right to their own religious lessons in the educational system and have to attend the compulsory DKAB lessons. This situation has not been changed by two verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2007 and again in 2014 that Turkey’s policies on religious education for the Alevi were in violation of the standards of the European Convention on Human Rights (Gürcan 2015, 10–12). The DKAB curriculum does mention Alevism in connection with Islam, particularly Islamic mysticism, because for the Turkish state Alevis are officially Muslims.

Since 2007, the AKP’s so-called Alevi opening has pledged to take Alevi identity into account in its policies. For example, the AKP’s party platform refers to citizens’ own religion and parental wishes when considering religious education and the new elective courses in the curricula. However, it has not satisfied the Alevi demands for more recognition in the educational system (Gürcan 2015, 10).

**Continuing State Control of Religion**

After the educational reform in 2012, the state continues to control religion in the educational system. Education is still centralized, DKAB lessons are compulsory and religious minorities, such as the Alevi people, have not gained exemptions or special provisions in this respect.

The four changes discussed above have eased restrictions on Islam in the educational system. Although religion has always been a part of the public sphere and has been part of the educational system for the past decades, the AKP’s 2012 reform challenged the previous, restricted place of religion. In summary, the role of Islam has increased in the educational system, but the state has retained tight control over religion.

The CHP’s election manifesto in 2015 suggested that DKAB be made an elective subject and that greater respect be accorded to different beliefs and faith groups. This could been seen as an attempt to create a clear policy difference with the AKP in terms of religious education. It will be interesting to see whether the CHP will incorporate those manifesto ideas into its party platform and how its educational policies will develop.

The AKP won the parliamentary elections on 1 November 2015 with 49.4% of votes, allowing it to govern without having to form a coalition. This gives the party a mandate to continue its reforms to
the educational system. Despite the European court rulings, DKAB is likely to remain a compulsory subject. Presumably, overall centralization of education will not decrease; possibly, the status of religion, particularly Islam, will strengthen. By keeping the education centralized, the AKP can determine what kind of Islam it promotes in the educational system. It remains to be seen how it will proceed and how it will take account of minority groups.

Bibliography
