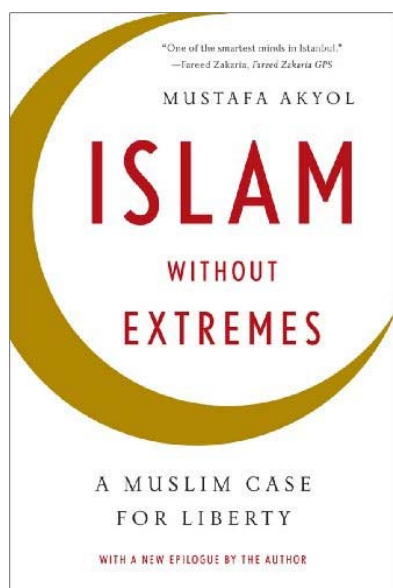


The Failure of the “Turkish Model”

by Stephen Schwartz



Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty. By Mustafa Akyol. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011. 352 pp. \$25.95.

The publication of this book, three years ago, was received in the West with some enthusiasm. The volume seemed to promise that the dream of numerous observers of the Muslim world—that a “moderate” Islamist ideology could emerge and that it would be paired with an opening to free-market economics—would be realized after many decades, if not centuries. Unfortunately, the flow of history since 2011, especially in the author’s native Turkey, has discredited such fancies. Democratization of the Arab countries and liberalization of Turkey have nearly disappeared from dialogue on the future of Islam. The “Arab Spring” now resembles a sad joke, and Turkish democracy is an object of rebuke.

Akyol, the son of a prominent Turkish journalist, had followed in his father’s

professional footsteps, becoming a commentator in Turkish newspapers and gaining significant access to media in the United States. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist atrocities, he appeared frequently in Washington, visiting conservative and libertarian think-tanks and spreading a message of support for the then-novel idea of “Islamism-lite” represented by Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Akyol argued that the AKP’s ideology was based on entrepreneurship and, therefore, on freedom. He proposed that the party’s program would reinforce religious values in the public sphere without interfering with a general secularism in the state structure, an Islamic parallel to the Christian Democrats of Europe. This narrative of an Islamic politics wedded to capitalism—a “bourgeois revolution” within the world’s Muslim community—met inevitably with favor in the West. The reality, however, was far less rosy, and *Islam without Extremes* went to great lengths to paper over the problematical aspects of such reveries.

The most obvious obstacle to this tale of “capitalist Islamism” was the absence of a religious business class in Turkey for much of its history. More than seventy-five years of official secularism—resting on the army and a French-style conception of a single, supposedly unifying, national identity that would replace religious, ethnic, and other differences—had at the same time, placed the levers of the economy firmly in the hands of the state. Since its secularized beginnings in 1922, Turkey had become a one-party regime under Mustafa Kemal’s Republican People’s Party (CHP). The legacy of Kemalism began to unravel in 1950 when Turkey’s first free and fairly-counted national balloting produced a victory

for a pro-U.S. opposition movement led by Adnan Menderes (1899-1961). Menderes was removed by the military in 1960 and hanged the next year. In the four decades that followed, Turkish politics oscillated between militarism, secularism, and the slow, then rapid, rise of Islamist forces.

Akyol presented the emergence and growth of Islamist politics in Turkey as representing an “increasing ... aspir[ation] to democracy.” But his own account of the numerous conflicts that accompanied the ascent of “Islamic liberalism” disproved his analysis by showing that under a thin garment of economic “liberalism,” the ogre of Islamist ideology remained alive and menacing.

The book’s introduction includes dismaying details unlikely to be noticed by someone not well-versed in Turkish history. The author’s father was jailed by the military authorities in 1980, and Akyol visited him in prison, which he recalls as “tyranny not in the name of Islam ... but in the name of the secular state.” Although insisting that his father’s only offense was “being a public intellectual,” he soon reveals nonchalantly that Akyol père was a supporter of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). The author neglects to mention that the MHP, headed by the sinister Alparslan Türkeş (1917-97), had conducted a widespread campaign of assassinations and massacres directed against the radical Left, the heterodox Alevi Muslim minority, and secularist intellectuals during the second half of the 1970s. He also ignores its terrorist youth arm, the “Grey Wolves,” notwithstanding that even today its activities threaten secularists and Alevis.

Islam prior to the Ottoman era was presented by Akyol as the “curious story” of the faith and its intellectual development. In the author’s rush to acclaim a recent, purported Turkish “synthesis of Islam and liberalism,” he sacrificed nuances in Islamic historiography involving topics such as the

unsettled debate over rationalism posed by the intellectual attitudes of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Akyol appeared heavily invested in the ignorance of his readers, believing that simply repeating buzzwords such as “rationalism,” “liberalism,” and “democracy” would suffice to win over his audience.

Akyol advocated for nineteenth-century Ottoman reformers and their supposed heirs. In his view, this legacy is represented by the ostensible “democratic conservatism” of the AKP and the successive administrations led by Erdoğan, who trained as a Muslim cleric.

The author noted correctly that the appeal of the AKP was enhanced by the development, at last, of an Islamist business class of rural origin, the so-called “Anatolian tigers.” Akyol then simplistically equated private enterprise with democracy. But if capitalism in the past and in the West led inevitably to civil society and thence to democracy, it seems to have had an opposite outcome in such countries as China, post-Soviet Russia, and Turkey. Civil society has been weak in the first two, and because it was secular, civil society became a target of the AKP in Akyol’s native land.

In his description of the AKP, Akyol neglects to note how the party emerged from Milli Görüş (National Vision), another ultrarightist movement, led by the political leader and flamboyant demagogue Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011). While pointing out that the AKP and Milli Görüş split when Erdoğan endorsed the application for Turkish membership in the European Union, Akyol overstates the alienation of the AKP from Milli Görüş, notorious for its anti-Western, Jew-baiting, and conspiratorial attitudes. As demonstrated in numerous instances of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel rage by the AKP, Milli Görüş cadres—including Erdoğan himself—have entered the AKP without changing their

basic outlook. Akyol appears to be cut from this same cloth as he repeats the libel that Jews believe “they had an inherent sense of superiority over the Gentiles.” Akyol’s ardor for the “Turkish model” as an exemplar for other Muslim societies and the Arab uprisings, which had just begun when his book was published, further undermined his thesis. Akyol benignly described “a more democratic era ... apparently at dawn in the Muslim world” and the Muslim Brotherhood as “changed” into a democratic Islamist phenomenon. The mass disaffection with AKP in Turkey, the reestablishment of military rule in Egypt, and the horrific bloodshed in Syria must leave him downcast.

Islam without Extremes closes with Akyol’s ambiguous defense of the rights to apostasy and criticism of Islam in his brave new world, combined with the suggestion that under “Islamic democracy,” drinking alcohol would not be prohibited. This would perhaps be amusing if the 2013 Taksim Square demonstrations in Istanbul and other cities, put down violently, if only temporarily, by the AKP, had not been in some part an outcome of Erdoğan’s announcement that the advertising and sale of alcoholic beverages should be restricted. More disturbingly, Akyol

ignores the repellent record of Erdoğan’s clique in promoting purge trials based on the questionable “Ergenekon” and “Sledgehammer” conspiracies, or the discomfiting statistic that Turkey under the AKP leads the world in persecuting journalists. More recent challenges to the AKP utopia have included legal inquiries into corrupt practices by members of Erdoğan’s family, Erdoğan’s outlandish reaction to these events, in which he banned Twitter and YouTube for reposting news of the judicial inquiries, and Erdoğan’s messy split with rival Islamist Fethullah Gülen.

Akyol is neither the first nor the last author to be inconvenienced by events that failed to conform to hurried and exuberant claims about incidents taking place as he wrote. It is only unfortunate that the fantasies expressed in this book may have gained him credibility, at least temporarily, among the U.S. political elite, hypnotized by the exploitation of entrepreneurial and democratic promises.



Stephen Schwartz is a principal investigator at the Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP).