Islamophobia as a Phenotypical Racism: The Case of the Islamic Style of Clothing in Turkey

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Islamophobia as a Phenotypical Racism: The Case of the Islamic Style of Clothing in Turkey

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ABSTRACT: There are many more debates about Islamophobia’s racist dispositions in a Muslim-majority society, but the way these dispositions are exercised would be better studied if the fundamental causes were addressed first. Any form of racism can be defined as premeditated acts of degradation, humiliation, and hatred that occur in the context of everyday or regular actions. In previous centuries, racism was limited to phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, hair color, and eye color, but in today’s age of image, phenotypes have been transformed into body extensions such as clothing, resulting in a new type of “racial bias” directed at those who appear to be different from the rest of society. Turkey stands out above many other Muslim countries in terms of culture, traditions, and history, as one of the few superpowers to have ruled over a vast territory without being colonized at any point in its history. The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, the social fabric was forced to transform into a new pattern. By showing, representing, and projecting Islam as a specter of reactionary forces, it was alleged it may be eradicated from people’s daily lives. Islam was labelled a public enemy, along with anything that reminded people of it; women were singled out for their outer clothing standards. The self-proclaimed emancipators were able to save and free women from their oppressors by portraying them as meek and backward. Some people in Muslim-majority nations may be treated differently solely because of their phenotypical physical distinctions, which could be termed racism and eventually lead to Islamophobia.

Key words: Islamophobia, phenotypical, racism, clothing, headscarf, beard, Turkey

During my post-graduate days in London, I still remember a heated debate I engaged with a very famous British anthropologist in one of our classes. The instructor was lecturing on the subject of male circumcision in Muslim societies and suddenly and unexpectedly shifted the subject to headscarved women, claiming that they were made “invisible” with their headscarves within the public space. For him, these women were “free” in their private homes and areas but as soon as they stepped outside of their safe havens they became interpellated by their male counterparts. I objected that in non-Muslim and Western societies women, particularly those who were employed in the financial sector, were made “invisible” by their clothing, almost a uniform similar to the males with their grey-striped two-piece suits and leather briefcases. In fact, I tried to counter-argue that at least in some Western countries women would make themselves invisible or unnoticed in their societies by imitating their masculine counterparts.

The issue of visibility since then has occupied particularly the Turkish religio-political sphere. In Turkey the issue of headscarf was seen as a problem of “visibility.” As long as women wore their headscarves within their private spaces and to some extent in public spaces like streets or parks it was not a problem. However, the moment they wanted to use this accessory in schools or state offices the issue would suddenly become a matter of visibility and would not be allowed in the public sphere as it would dent laicism of the state.
The visibility of Muslim actors’ symbols, signs, or performances would threaten the Republic’s accumulations in terms of laïcité militant à la Française as they were considered to express not religious meaning but ideological challenge to the state. The outward appearances of some of Turkish citizens, like headscarves, beards, or even clothes that could be associated with rural settlements, were thought to be a threat to the Republican project. Founded on the Ottoman Empire, the young Republic was designed to be a “modern” state like her European or Western counterparts and the modernization project was necessarily a “top-down” implementation transforming the society to the level of contemporary civilization.3

The unstoppable decline of the Empire was attributed to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was the sole representative of the Islamic world. The young intellectuals of the Republic related the backwardness and regression of either Islam or, sometimes, Muslims themselves. The founding elites who wished to establish a new state in a Western form despite the enmeshed religious fabric of the society tried to separate religion and state from each other. Yet, this separation did not take place in the same way as in Western states like Britain or the United States but it followed more the tracks of France in which religion was subordinated to the state. A social conflict under these circumstances was inevitable as the society with its religious values and the state officials’ negative attitudes towards pious people would eventually clash with each other. Perceiving Islam as the main cause of backwardness was the fundamental motivation of social infighting within the Turkish society. The struggle went so far as to amount to a kind of racism towards a segment of society. The concept of racism is a Schimpfwort, and there is no agreed upon definition of it, but it is a recurrent theme throughout humanity’s history. I will attempt to demonstrate in this article that there is a link between racism and religion.

The students of race studies would immediately react that such a link has existed for such a long time between Islam (Islamophobia and its various formats like anti-Islam feeling, hating, labeling, or categorizing Muslims as “others”) and racism but it is almost absent when it comes to anti-Semitism. Anything related to the Jewish society, culture, and even Judaism has been under a sort of protection from criticism or attack. Yet, having some anti-Jewish sentiments would perhaps not be accountable as racism as the members or followers of a religion would not constitute a “race” in the strictest sense of the term. Speaking with Ferdinand de Saussure’s terms, calling any type of racism related to religious believers would be the same speaking about “signifieds” without “signifiers.” In other words, the signs or symbols are no longer arbitrary and the signified, the end-product, has been mediated through power discourses and mediated and manipulated by the speakers and listeners.4 If the chain between the signer and the signified has been broken then the relationship between the concepts of race and religion had already suffered damage and we have now many signifieds in our hands without signifiers, or the signifieds are not any more pre-fixed and predetermined. Since culture is central to race and racism, religion or beliefs related to a specified group cannot be separated from the notion of culture. Today it is a new phenomenon that, whether they are immigrants, Gastarbeiter (guest workers), refugees, or even tourists in other countries, Muslims are being racialized and viewed as inferior simply because they are foreign and therefore embody a potentiality for criminality. Despite the generally contented idea of referring to species or variety, it is often argued that the concept of race was “constructed socially.” However, this “construction” does not eliminate or ignore the fact that there is human biological variation and diversity but it draws attention to the process of some social and historical categories being used to define or rather categorize some groups within a certain society.5

In his influential article John Relethford remarks on the use of “race” to refer to the “aspects of both biological and cultural variation and has been applied to everything from geography to genes and from ancestry to language” (2009, 16). He also notes that the concept has been used to refer to people according to their geographical settings like Africans, Asians, Europeans, or even some sub-continental groups like Southeastern Asians. Amongst so many dissimilar and divergent
usages of the term race it is no surprise that it could become a convenient apparatus to denote and
categorize Muslims, with the tools of racism from skin color (definitely not ‘white’ but sometimes
as ‘brown’ or ‘dark’) to craniofacial/craniometrical shape, and hair color and texture. Specializing in
phenotypic variation, Relethford (2009, 20) asks the important question; “do races exist?” he
responds to such a fundamental question in racial studies by ascertaining that “race is culturally
constructed, as all labels are, but is also based on an underlying reality of biological variation …
and it is] a culturally constructed label that crudely and imprecisely describes real variation”. In
addition to biological variations, as religion and race have often overlapped, some members of reli-
gions would clearly be categorized as if they are easily distinguishable according to their pheno-
typical differences like their skin color. Muslim bodies all over the world are labeled and most
importantly identified by their outward appearances, linking their headscarves, prayer caps,
beards, and clothes to cultural backwardness.

If race is a social construct, all of its components like being “black” or “white” are the
products of this construction and, consequently, the racial hierarchy determines their places in
the society. In most societies in the world, the exclusiveness of “whiteness” allows racists to
implement their white social order without using a pro-white terminology. For instance,
Muslims in particular and Asians in general are viewed by some as potential threats to British
society’s social order and cultural and national identity. This negative attitude would become
more obvious and leads to creation of a new category: “brown bodies” which refer to erstwhile
white people who had converted to Islam. In other words, a brown body is like an anomalous
species that combines being whiteness and Muslim at the same time since these two character-
istics of Islam and whiteness are seen as incompatible.

RELATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF RACE IN TURKEY

In a similar way in Turkey, whiteness has been associated with all the positive respect-
tabilities like being modern, progressive, open-mindedness, fine manners, etc. On the other
hand, religiosity or piousness is considered to be equal to backwardness, anti-modern, a sign of
narrow-mindedness, radicalism, and being reactionary. As a sociological fact the religion of
Islam has had a crucial role to play in Turkey’s political, legal, cultural, and social spheres since
the beginning. Yet, like Catholics in Northern Ireland or Jews in general, the Muslims of
Turkey have been exposed to all kinds of “religious discrimination.” Although the Catholics in
Northern Ireland, the Jews all over the world, or the Muslims in Turkey were native peoples of
the land and part of the common culture, they became subject to stereotypes about foreignness,
phenotypes, or social norms. Thus, Islamophobia in Turkey does not target foreign or non-
Turkish groups but on the contrary, the victims are the eternal inhabitants of these lands.

Turkey was founded on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and cut all its ties with that
traditional entity after the declaration of the Republic in the 1920s. Some people claim that the
elements of contemporary national identity, like the traditions, customs, common history,
language, and religion, make the nation of Turks distinct from all others. This group believes
that they should conserve all of these elements in order to continue to exist as a separate politi-
cal entity in the world arena. However, there is also another group who believes that Turkey is
a modern nation different from the Ottoman Empire and therefore, needs to display character-
istics suitable for a modern nation-state purged all of its traditional elements and old customs.
During the formation period, the founding elites under the leadership Mustafa Kemal Ataturk
forged a new identity and self-image of Turkey to represent six-centuries-old Ottoman dynasty
as part of the process of the Turkish Revolution. This image of Turkish national identity was
built on the concept of secularism and nationalism. Yet, this understanding of secularism was
quite problematic in the Turkish context owing to the nature of this model. In European or
other Western societies, because of their experience with Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, laïcité was understood as a total denial of religion from the public space. This type of laïcité, as implemented in France almost in a militant fashion, was taken, adapted, and imitated by the young Turkish Republic.

The formation years of the Republic witnessed a strict separation between the Muslim faith and social, public, and political life. This historical experience was bitterly felt by virtually all segments of the society through prohibitions, exclusion, hindrance, and blockage from public space, education, economic and cultural institutions, and many other social and political privileges. Majority Turkish people have felt excluded and marginalized by the privileged minority, as Serif Mardin succinctly put in a timeless argument of the differentiation between the center and periphery of Turkish society. Nearly a century later this perception of secularism was challenged during the Justice and Development (AK) Party governments and another reading of secularism began to be adapted, this time from Britain. This Anglo-Saxon type of liberal secularism displayed an equal distance to all types of religious systems as practiced in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. For the majority of Turkish people their religion is part and parcel of their national self-image. Treating religion of Islam like the Catholic Church and its hierarchy was not proper in Turkey because attitudes towards religion in Europe since the Middle Ages were wrought with criticisms. These criticisms from mild to ferocious debates particularly in modern times and in France were raised against the real or imagined trespassing of the clergy against the basic teachings of Christianity. This attitude was expressed not only in Catholicism but also in Protestantism as well as they voiced their disapproval of the clergy’s behavior, for instance, the Church’s engagement with financial and more importantly political affairs of the society. The clergy’s social privileges, like protection from judicial processes, made people feel unhappy and develop a feeling of revulsion from the institution. Furthermore, the rumors about the clergy’s improper sexual behavior, tax exemption, etc. all added to resentment against religion. Anticlericalism in both France and the Protestant countries was one of the main reasons for later political and ideological developments like liberalism and secularism and ultimately democracy. Each society has had diverse experiences of these developments. The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and technological advancement gave way to economic prosperity and allowed individuals to question the authority of political and religious institutions. In early stages of anticlericalism, criticisms were directed at the shortcomings of the Church both within it and from outside, by famous intellectuals like Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Martin Luther, and Desiderius Erasmus. This hostile attitude towards religion might have been more understandable in the historical European context, however, some young Turkish students who were sent, for example, to France to receive training in engineering to contribute to the Ottoman Empire’s military sector were also influenced by the current debates in Parisian cafés in that period. These young Ottoman intellectuals were not taking account of the prevailing circumstances of their own society. However, the staunch laicists of modern Turkey continue to deny the traditional past, with its contribution to human civilization in Turkish states with Islam as their inalienable part of identity. Islamophobia continues to be an important tool that reproduces the cultural laicist hegemony over Muslims. Advances in political representation of Muslims should certainly be complemented by cultural transformations to deconstruct the dichotomy between Islam and modernity so that Islamophobia can adequately be tackled.

It seems that the founding elites of Turkish Republic had a particular understanding of the concepts of laicism (separation of state and church, roughly) or even “secularism” (which relates to what is profane, non-religious, unclerical and this-worldly) so that if Turkey wished to be modernized it needed to erase religion and related institutions. Yet, this particular understanding of the secular worldview has produced a lamentable experience for pious people who felt coerced to become modern against their will. There has been escalating tension between this sector of society and the so-called privileged classes who have monopolized the mass-cultural
institutions in the country. Consequently, the Muslim faith has been used as an instrument to keep some segments of the society who devote themselves to their religion under societal control, particularly using the state apparatus of the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Directorate of Religious Affairs).

TURKISH APPROACH TO CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE PAST AND MODERNITY

It appears that in Turkey anything that is in continuity with the past is considered and classified as the “other” of modern life by militant secularists. The question of reconcilability of a past tradition with modernity—as Charles Taylor appropriately asks whether a “modern Catholicism” would fit into our modern world—has been echoed in the cliché-ed claims of whether Islam could reconcile with democracy, modernity, or Western values. The meanings of the concepts like East, West, traditional, modern, backwardness, or progressiveness or enlightenment, etc. have been defined in local contexts and usually tradition has been associated with backwardness and modernity with secularism. There are many heated debates about where the country should belong as it stands at the edge of East and West, and of course these two opposites represent two entirely different phenomena. Perhaps for this reason, the so-called Turkish modernity is hard to distinguish from Westernization; anything associated with the “East” has been excluded from the modernity.

In Turkey, some segments of the society could not directly reject the Muslim faith and instead they claim that some elements of the practiced Islam belong to other societies and cultures and they insist they are against these elements, like Arabic clothing, not Islam itself. I am aware that if we classify them as Islamophobes they would immediately refuse this kind of labeling—instead they would consider themselves as something like “progressive Muslims” or “Muslims adapted to the values of the Enlightenment”; therefore, it would not be an easy task to go around accusing people of attacking Islam. Yet, if ordinary Muslims on the street feel threatened by these kinds of attitudes coming from other fellow secularized Muslims and especially if they believe that their fundamental rights are not respected, then we might carefully consider these attitudes as Islamophobic. Despite the current common belief in Turkey that Turkish people are in no way racists, it is obvious that they are—contrary to their historical inheritance from the Ottoman Empire—nonetheless becoming less and less tolerant of others.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

The founding figures of the Turkish Republic have distinguished themselves as having equipped it with contemporary Western values and principles. They have insisted that their values are part of modern democratic societies and they firmly believed that Turkish nation could only be emancipated by adopting these “modern values.” Yet, if any of these values links with some religious aspect of Turkish national identity, they would immediately oppose them in the name of modernity. This attitude could be tolerated during the formation years but as Turkish society matured in terms of democratic values, especially in this age of individual rights, some groups and political forums began to resist against the violations of recent decades.

For instance, nowadays there is an extra-curricular activity that could be termed as “values education” in Turkish primary schools in which children are taught some basic social and cultural values of a Muslim-majority country. Until recently, it would be a familiar TV news bulletin item that a school teacher had taken his/her students on an excursion that included a visit to a local mosque, or a principal of a high school had allowed a disused lower-ground room be designated as a prayer room. These types of behaviors were once considered as a potential threat to secular Turkish Republic. The Turkish—or rather, the state’s—understanding of secularism needs to be reassessed as there are alternatives to a French-type militant laicism, such as an Anglo-Saxon type secularism, which stands at
equal distance towards different beliefs or non-beliefs by protecting their rights to exist in a modern society. It could be reflected as one of the successes of the AK Party that the society has been in transition towards this type and understanding of secularism in this century. In this regard, various steps have been taken, including “Alevi Workshops” that deal with finding solutions for the problems of Alevis in Turkey; and the restoration of various churches and synagogues such as the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Aghtamar in 2007 and the Grand Synagogue of Edirne in 2015. The AK Party period signaled a process of democratization in terms of the practicing of religious identities.

Despite positive developments with regard to the Anglo-Saxon type of secularism in Turkey, religion and particularly Islam has historically been a source of anxiety. Recently, the government has planned to introduce prayer rooms to public high schools to enable a necessary space for anyone to practice his/her religious duties. The long-established Islamophobic tendencies consider this development not as a democratic step for people to enjoy freedom of religion, but as a destructive step against the foundations of the laicist regime. Similarly, members of the Turkish armed forces could now use headscarves as part of their military uniforms, or some young children—with the permission of their parents—could fast from dawn to noon to imitate adults’ fasting all day as part of their values education activity. These developments could be considered as part of individual freedoms to exercise personal rights—allowing people to assert their independent choices without harming or denting other peoples’ freedoms. If a female member of the Turkish army decides to wear headscarf, she should be able to do it within certain military rules. Likewise, if some parents wish to teach their children the importance of a religious ritual that is physically tough in summer times like Ramadan fasting, again they should be able to try to instill the habit in their children. However, arguments against headscarf in the army continue, with the excuse of physical conditions of military training; yet most importantly, the army is the fortress of staunch Kemalist laicists. Teaching religion to small children could be considered another threat to the so-called fundamental secular values of the Republic. Opponents claim that religion needs to be kept out of the social and cultural public space to prevent it from becoming an oppressing factor in others.

While hostility towards religion took the form of anticlericalism in the West, a similar antagonism took the guise of opposing any type of religion and religious activities in Turkey. What is more, all religious displays were considered to be damaging to the secular Turkish national identity. Opposition in the Turkish case was not directed at certain aspects of the religion of Islam but of all features of the religion in a wholesale manner, unlike at some parts of religion or religious institution, as in the case of anticlericalism. Talking about Islamophobia in a Muslim society might sound strange, but it is understood as simply opposing anything and everything religious in the society. In other words, Islamophobia in a Muslim society is something like a blend of anticlericalism and a specific understanding of secularism in others.

In the Turkish case Islam, as it was regarded as something belonging to the primordial national identity, needed to be denied and marginalized in the name of modernity. In this respect, Islam has become a hated subject that needs to be removed from the society. Besides, the Islamophobic treatment of religion needs to be so subtle that it could only be detected through a thorough examination or at least paying explicit attention to the contents of especially cultural products because the majority would refuse it immediately. In a non-Muslim society, hatred crimes against Muslims could be committed explicitly by some narrow-minded bigots. In a Muslim-majority country like Turkey, the Islamophobes must resort to some implicit tactics through the media, education, legal system or similar cultural apparatuses.

Modern Turkish history is filled with narratives of military coups in almost every decade after the transition to multi-party parliamentary system in the 1950s. The most recent and most memorable of these interventions occurred in 1997 on February 28; the military issued a series of so-called recommendations which the then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (Islamist Welfare Party) had to accept. All of the “recommendations” were related to religious
issues like the compulsory education program that would prevent children from enrolling in religious (Imam-Hatip, Imam-Preacher) high schools at an early age and the most influential one was the infamous ban on headscarves for university students. As a result, the party was closed down and a series of bans from politics were applied to many members of the party. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President, went on to establish the Justice and Development Party that would come to power immediately after the first election (2002) and still today continues to rule the country. Apart from this “unintended consequence” of this coup attempt of 1997, Turkish collective memory still keeps track of those events even today and they probably play an important part in the inevitable and unstoppable success of the AK Party.

One of the implementations of that military coup was preventing female students who wore headscarves from entering university campuses as well as male students who grew beards. The ban on dress codes would be understandable and acceptable in the cases like professions with a specific uniform, or standardized clothing according to the distinctive nature of the job. However, even in the cases of security officials like soldiers or police officers some exceptions could be applied, like headscarf under a helmet or beard of a Sikh person in the police force. Yet, under the hostile and militaristic style of Turkish laicism any religious symbol would be removed from the public sphere without any toleration. People who wished to show these symbols on their bodies would immediately become “brown bodies” in the Turkish context. They were made “brown” because their corporeal appearances were the clearest visual cue to distinguish them from the rest of the society. The corporeal politics has increasingly become prominent in various arenas like media and politics, as photos, selfies, memes, and likes of the digital age have become part of individual lives. Sadly, the “brown lives” were “perceived as inherently less in worth than [their] white counterpart[s]” as they were considered not to be entitled to any fundamental rights like education.

The brown body was racialized as being inferior to others or even someone who is unable to act rationally and reasonably and therefore needed to be guided by the “Republican, secular, and Kemalist whites” to reach the right path. Being subject to police brutality these brown bodies were repelled from the main gates of universities and witnessing these obnoxious scenes some sensible remorseful people wished to “help” these students. The most prominent figure to become a household name in those gruesome days was Professor Nur Serter. In her own words, Fatma Nur Serter (b. November 10, 1948) is an economist and her professional success brought her to the vice-chancellorship of Istanbul University during those hectic days of the so-called post-modern coup. Probably due to her maternal instincts she rushed to release the chains of these poor Anatolian girls to free them from the darkness of the Middle Ages. Something called “persuasion rooms” emerged to convince young “brown bodies” to remove their headscarves in order to gain the right to attend their colleges.

Turkey is a densely populated country with some 80 million relatively young population and both the youth and their parents attach a lot of importance to education, particularly college education since it is seen as a key to find employment. As in other contemporary societies, in Turkey the education of women is extremely important to create a better generation. So, if young girls would achieve—after a substantial amount of hard work—at the college level it is something precious, not to be wasted; putting any pressure on these young bodies could cause many unexpected consequences such as alienation from their immediate families. Coercing these people to make their minds up to attend or not is an extremely heavy responsibility at such a young age. From another perspective, these individuals believe that covering one’s hair is a religious obligation in Islam, so if one does not heed this command one would become a sinner. No matter what one’s faith, she/he should be able to practice its requirements: this is the subject of all kinds of freedoms. If and when an individual is denied certain rights simply because of one’s religion or belief, then the case is a subject of racism, cultural racism, religious racism, and of course, Islamophobia. Nobody has any right to attempt to rescue anybody from their own culture and traditions.
MEDIA AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

The media play an important role in framing the public discourses on almost anything in Turkey. As an absolute Muslim-majority country the Turkish media also form the perception of Islam in the country. The media image of Islam has constantly been shaped and reshaped according to the conjuncture of contemporary politics. In a non-Muslim-majority society, it could appear in countless forms from news coverage to implicit representation in other media products like movies and television serials. Islamophobic images and texts could easily be utilized implicitly or explicitly in these societies; however, in a Muslim-majority society, the consumers of media are exposed to Islamophobia in a much subtler way.24

The relationship of that specific society with modernization or more specifically Westernization plays an important role in the production of these Islamophobic images. For instance, in Turkey, a country which has been attempting to realize its own modernization process for almost two centuries, the media assume the role of distancing the society from its roots and traditions. Islam has been linked to traditionalism and backwardness and needs to be hidden from the public space as it might be a hindrance toward modernization. The media try to hide the reality of Islamic existence in the society by portraying Turkish people as having no religion at all. News bulletins are designated according to the political context and the media’s assumption of being powerful or not; when they are powerful, news bulletins would depict religious people as dangerous to the society and the laïque regime; at other times, like the years in which the AK Party has been in power and in a more democratized context, certain media outlets prefer to cover religious issues in a more implicit negative manner. Anybody who lived in Turkey just a decade ago would clearly remember the media treatment of religious people in a condescending manner. Any argument rejecting this view would be null as the feelings of the subject are more important in these issues; if and when one feels humiliated by any kind of conduct it is not for someone else to say, “no, you aren’t humiliated.” These treatments would range from making fun of taking off one’s shoes before entering a house, eating dinner while sitting on the floor instead of using a table, even eating too much bread or pasta, drinking raki (a traditional strong alcoholic drink) instead of consuming red or white wine, the types and qualities of people’s clothes to requesting a permission in the workplaces or schools to perform their daily religious rituals.

Soap opera occupies a great part of many television channels’ prime time broadcast all over the world. Recently, Turkish soap operas have gained a huge popularity in different countries that show them either dubbed or with subtitles. It is claimed even that some of these soap operas might have caused some social movements, especially in Muslim societies, as they depict a Muslim but at the same time a modern country. However, the soap operas that have been shown in Turkey for decades have never included any religious aspect of Turkish social life. A comparable situation exists for advertising imagery. Advertisements are an essential tool in representing lifestyles and cultural meanings in a society. In Turkey, there is a dominant advertising language which represents culture in an excessively secularized format, which is devoid of any signifiers that may be related to Islam or Islamic lifestyles. Even in Ramadan advertisements, global brands such as Coca Cola disseminate images that fail to cover the reality of Ramadan in Turkey as if coke-drinking is an inseparable part of the daily fast-breaking diet of the Ramadan. Similarly, if one watches any Turkish television channels via satellite dish and does not understand the language, one would not think that they are watching a Muslim country’s TV channel from what they witness on the screen: there is almost no head-covered news anchor presenting daily news programs or among the “experts” giving information on their specialized areas or discussing in debate shows. The media constitute an ideological space where long-established Islamophobia can be legitimized and normalized. This is mainly due to the hegemonic structure of the media industry and its professionals. Since the early stages of the Republican era, Islamic segments have been systematically othered and left out of various industries,
especially the media. Despite the recent transformations in the sector, in terms of the increasing participation of specialists with Islamic identities, the secular hegemony that governs Islamophobia as a narrative persists. Hopefully, Turkey and its media will progress towards an egalitarian language and representation in the near future and manage to become distanced from the Islamophobic context.

On any day, visiting a newsstand kiosk anywhere in the country, one would definitely find a lot of Islamophobic content in some of the printed media outlets. For instance, just from a casual look at one single daily newspaper like the Sözcü (www.sozcu.com.tr) one can find racist statements in the name of Kemalism, the founding ideology of the Republic. Here I need to repeat again that, if the subject feels racially humiliated by any physical or symbolic action, her or his impressions must be heeded first. Since the majority of the Turkish public denies their racism they are confusing it with fascism or similar political views without being aware of their own racist attitudes. It is often heard that the Turkish nation is the only one in the world free of racist frame of mind. If the readers follow the link they will see some visuals used in their coverage from the front page of the Sözcü on March 28, 2018 (https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/ataturk-tisortu-giydi-meclise-giremedi-2314628/ accessed on March 28, 2018). There is an illustration to enhance the effect of the item which is about a t-shirt of a citizen who visited the Turkish Grand National Assembly previous day. It claims (there is no clear source) that some police officers forced the citizen to remove his t-shirt displaying a picture of Kemal Atatürk and an inscription (one of the political slogans of the Republican Peoples’ Party) that reads “we are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal” beneath the picture.

The second part of the news item is about another Turkish citizen who visited the Parliament on the same day dressed in a religious gown and a prayer cap with a conspicuous beard. It is said that one person wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Atatürk was not allowed to enter the building but another person who “obviously dressed against the values of the Republic” could freely wander around the AK Party’s offices in the Turkish parliament without any obstruction. It is absolutely not known why the first citizen was denied entry (in fact, he is shown inside the CHP meeting hall in the picture) since the image is a very common scene in almost all CHP political rallies and the extremely militaristic slogan has been chanted for such a long time since the first and the consecutive military coups in the country. In fact, military interventions were supported by these groups against the second type of citizens—when all the political means ran out the army would be invited to deal with the danger at hand. It stands to reason that it is not acceptable to remove a t-shirt that displays Mustafa Kemal: it needs to be investigated and the responsible personnel should be punished if there was no acceptable excuse. Similarly, the second citizen, like millions of others, does not deserve to be treated like a threat to the foundations of the Republic simply because of his phenotypical appearance. The Kemalist segment of the society needs to learn how to live with those who differ from them. In this case reported by the Sözcü the person with apparently religious clothes is treated with phenotypical racism that could be witnessed in many spaces in Turkey. If asked, the reporters or the administration would vehemently deny the accusations of being Islamophobes as they rather naively think that they are protecting “our land from a crippling damage coming from the past”. This Kemalist part of the society prefers to keep these phenotypically dissimilar members of the society away from the public space as if they do not exist at all.

On the same day (March 28, 2018) on the front page of the daily Sözcü, just next to the previous item, the editorial of the newspaper decided to cover an event that had happened some twenty-seven days before in the eastern part of Turkey. The caption reads something like this: “instead of distributing the students some items like books, notebooks or pencils the local representative of the Ministry of National Education distributed turbans in the school” (https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/milli-egitim-muduru-turban-dagitti-2314764/ accessed on March 28, 2018).
Going into details of the news item, one learns that the official person visited a local religious imam-hatip secondary school and he gave female students some headscarves as gifts. The next day students attended school with their new headscarves and the school administration shared the photographs of both the distribution ceremony and the next day attendance of the students in the school backyard in the school’s social media accounts. It is true, in some of the schools in eastern part of Turkey students might need some teaching materials and from time to time there are campaigns in the country to collect these items to provide the ones that need them. However, students would also need some other things like clothes, computers, or even sometimes toys and there is no prohibition on distributing such items in a community sharing sentiment. It is obvious that the specific item (headscarf) here causes a problem with the positivist mind of Kemalist-secular elites. It must be very difficult for them that some students might both need some computers (representing the superior culture of modernity) and turbans (something that represents backwardness) at the same time. It does not occur to them that a headscarved woman or a bearded man would definitely be able to use electronic devices and create wonderful results that would be useful for both themselves and the whole society.

CONCLUSION

There could be many more debates on the racist dispositions of Islamophobia in a Muslim-majority country but the way in which these dispositions are exercised would be analyzed better by addressing the underlying causes first. Turkey presents a unique example among many other Muslim societies in terms of its culture, traditions but particularly its history as it was one of the superpowers that had governed a huge geography without being colonized in any stage of its history. The Ottoman State was exemplary in terms of treating its religious or ethnic minority subjects and creating and maintaining a harmonious society for six centuries. However, after the demise of the Empire, after losing its battle against modernity and modern colonial powers, the new nation-state was forced to accept the new terms of adopting a more secularized lifestyle. The formation years of the Republic passed with the strife between the traditional and modern, more secular lifestyles. Islam was considered as an obstacle towards achieving the level of contemporary civilization. Therefore, Islam could be wiped out from the daily lives of the people by presenting, representing, and portraying it as if it was a bogey of reactionary forces. Islam, and anything that reminds people of it, was declared a public enemy; women were particularly singled out by their outward manifestation of dress codes. Portraying women as submissive and backward has enabled the self-appointed emancipators to save and free them from their oppressors. This emancipation “business” establishes a racialized power relationship between the enlightened seculars and damned, submissive, and backward segments of the society. This was the general outlook seen by the “owners” of the country and the consequences were manifested in mass cultural products.

In conclusion, some individuals in Muslim-majority societies could be treated differently simply because of their phenotypical corporeal differences which might be considered at least a form of racism that would eventually lead to Islamophobia. Nobody is born racist but all the racists pass through a certain process of learning to become racists. That is perhaps why all racists deny that they are racists because in the process they internalize and normalize their actions. Definition of any type of racism could be reduced to deliberate acts of degradation, humiliation, and hatred within the scope of everyday or ordinary forms of one’s behaviors. In previous centuries racism was limited to mainly to phenotypical characteristics like skin, hair, or eye color but in today’s age of image, phenotypes are changed into the extensions of the body like clothes which has brought a new type of “racial bias” towards those who appear different
from the rest of the society. In the meantime, some “soft-hearted” members in positions of power of this racist society like Prof. Nur Serter would have what could be called “the sympathy of the whites” who would attempt to save others. Yet, these attempts are not purely to rescue these subalterns but, at the same time, to try to appease their own hatred or fear of the unknown.

ENDNOTES

1 See Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 98–100, in which we understand that London City stockbrokers could be treated like any other “ethnic groups” as an incorporate descent group with their symbolic formations they are different from the rest of British society and they display similar patterns of symbolic behavior, language, and dress codes.


7 For example, Tina Gudrun Jensen argues that Danes who convert to Islam are thought to lose their Danishness as they come to see themselves as “different”, “non-Danish” and excluded from Danish society. Here I use the term “brown bodies” in a similar way to depict “Muslimness” as an inferior category as opposed to “white supremacy”. T. Gudrun Jensen, “To be ‘Danish’, Becoming ‘Muslim’: Contestations of National Identity?” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34 no. 3 (2008): 389–409.


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17 One of the oldest newspapers in Turkey the Cumhuriyet daily, which was established on the orders of Kemal Atatürk, used to be a Republican newspaper that would try to instill the newly established state’s secular values in people in the beginning. However, after the multi-party period in the 1950s and during the Cold War it adopted a kind of leftist social democratic stance; whenever a conservative-led government came to power the newspaper would start a campaign to warn people with a highly provocative slogan of “are you aware of the danger/threat?” inscribed in Arabic-looking Latin letters—implying that Turkey would be hijacked from modern values and taken the country back into the darkness of the Middle Ages.

18 It means that Islam is not a part of social identity of the whole nation whether Muslim or not. I am not sure if I could treat the negative attitudes towards other religions (or even non-belief) in Turkey as part of Islamophobic treatment as the Christian clergy, for instance, are not allowed to wear their robes in public. My Christian friends who are local church clergy would complain that they also suffer the Islamophobic attitude’s consequences from time to time, that is, there is a general anti-religious sentiment in certain circles.


22 Similarly, White Western feminists have tried to save and liberate their sisters who remain under the oppression of dark ages in backward geographies, without seeking to learn what these “native” or “brown” women want in their own lives. See Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) and G. C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 90–105.
