

Nov 24 2015

## Beyond the Straight Path: Obstacles and Progress for Atheism in Turkey

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By [Maria Inês Teixeira](#)\*

Having long inspired Middle Eastern countries attempting to pursue a secular government while maintaining Islam as a reference, Turkey is often described as a bridge between civilizations; a functional blend of East and West, preserving the best of both worlds. However, a closer look will reveal a contemporary struggle for women's rights, freedom of speech and freedom of belief – or, more specifically in the case of belief, the freedom to express a lack thereof. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, representing the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power since 2002, has been internationally criticized for allegedly attempting to build a Neo-Ottoman Era, in which international human rights standards would suffer in favor of Islamic principles. However, despite President Erdoğan's pledge in 2002 to raise generations of devout Muslims, academic author Volkan Ertit [claims](#) Turks are walking away from religion: "The prohibition of selling alcoholic beverages on high-speed trains in Turkey, the desire to ban extramarital sex, the discussion of boys and girls living under the same roof, the statements that the Justice and Development Party is raising a 'pious generation'...all these are about the relation between the state and religion. But I am talking about the relation between religion and society. Society is not becoming more pious, the political arena is. The two are separate things." One thus realizes government policy and social behavior are not necessarily interchangeable. In Turkey, they often collide.

Aydın Türk, author of *Ateizmi Anlamak (Understanding Atheism)* and the blog [Turkish Atheist](#), explains the often negative connotation associated with the concept of atheism: "For a typical Muslim, the claim that someone does not believe in 'Allah' is so unbelievable that they always look for a catch. This person has to be either dishonest (a missionary who hides their true purpose), or mentally disabled, or psychologically unbalanced. The belief is that there is no way someone with a working brain would not believe in God. This has been the official view in Turkey, and possibly in the whole Islamic world when it comes to atheism".

However, the struggle for atheist rights in Turkey is more than cultural – it is legal. The Turkish [Association of Atheism](#), the first legal atheist organization in the Middle East and the Balkans founded in 2014, explicitly attempts to review details of the Turkish Penal Code and understand how it justifies punishment against atheists. [Article 216](#) of the Turkish Penal Code, for instance, is frequently used in court against atheists, under the accusation of inciting the population to enmity or hatred: "Anyone who openly denigrates the religious values of a part of the population shall be sentenced to imprisonment from six months to one year." However, when confronted with the list of lawsuits against atheism in Turkey published by the Turkish Association of Atheism, one realizes that "insulting Islam" is a rather broad accusation, including retweeting atheist poetry on Twitter, translating atheist texts to Turkish, or posting videos about evolutionism. The very website of Richard Dawkins, the iconic British ethologist, evolutionary biologist and writer, was shut down between 2008 and 2011. Furthermore, the website of the Turkish Association of Atheism [was also shut down](#) on 4 March 2015 – less than a year after its creation – with article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code justifying this move.

Such events directly violate the eighteenth article of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948): "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes *freedom to change* his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" [emphasis added]. Apostasy has long been perceived a crime in the Islamic world. In [Saudi Arabia](#), being an atheist is officially considered a terrorist offense. In [Egypt](#), abandoning faith is perceived as an unforgivable decision: in 2013, 88% of the population believed the death penalty was a just consequence for those who had decided to turn their backs on Islam. [Pakistan](#) presented similar statistics, with 60% of the population agreeing with the punishment. Rarely does contemporary law in Islamic countries recognize atheism *per se* as a crime: imprisonment and the death penalty are reserved for those who commit terrorism-related offenses. Considering previous observations regarding the cultural prejudice against atheism and the negative connotation it still suffers, one can understand how easily the atheist cause can be misunderstood or manipulated to signify terrorism, fear and the dissemination of an anti-Islam mindset. However, and as much as the *Holy Qur'an* clearly supports this perspective, atheism is far from signifying hatred for God. According to [Sener Atik](#) of the Turkish Association of Atheism in Istanbul, "Things we say are considered 'insults,' though in a secular state everyone should be free to believe whatever they want. Despite this, a journalist in a mainstream newspaper can explicitly write: "It's the duty of every Muslim to be cruel to atheists." But we do not have a problem with anyone's faith, nor are we adversaries of religions. We are only trying to inform."

However, not representing the most conservative of Middle Eastern countries, Turkey is an ideal environment to explore atheist rights in the Islamic world. A constitutionally secular nation, it currently faces an increasingly strained relationship between Islamic law and the promise of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, revolutionary and the president of the first secular Turkish republic in

1923. Additionally, the threat of a presidential system in which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would seize more power than the current constitution allows is imminent: “Whether one accepts it or not, Turkey’s administrative system has changed. Now, what should be done is to update this de facto situation in the legal framework of the constitution,” the President [claimed](#) in August 2015. This shift could imply bad news for atheists, in a country where [journalists are being increasingly harassed](#) and the index of internet freedom is lower than that of Nigeria.

However, atheism in Turkey is not stagnant. The common perception that Turkey is composed of a 99% Muslim population [is condemned](#) by the Turkish Association of Atheism as a cliché: “Although it violates Articles 14 and 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the religion of children in Turkey is stated both on state identification cards and birth certificates issued in Turkey. (...) As we know, religion is not transferred via DNA or genetics. Therefore, such assumptions should not be made by the state or the family of a child. (...) The revelation of religious affiliation or lack thereof automatically creates bias and prejudice for individuals who do not affiliate themselves with the majority belief system, in this case Sunni Islam.” The Association provides further suggestions for reformation, such as creating a more pronounced separation between mandatory education and religious courses, eschewing the practice of forcing minors to participate in religious rites and rituals in public boarding homes, and drafting new laws protecting the rights of religious minorities and atheists and punishing discrimination against them.

The need for these initiatives illustrates that the detainment of and discrimination against atheists and religious minorities is a reality in present-day Turkey. The Association of Atheism, atheist authors such as Aydın Türk and Twitter activists expressing their detachment from Islamic teachings may be the architects of a new destination beyond the straight path.

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