Civil Society, Islam and Democracy in Turkey: A Study of Three Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations

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The following article studies three Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey and evaluates them in terms of their contributions to the process of democratization in that country. There is not a necessarily positive correlation between civil society and democratization. As A. R. Norton said in the introduction of the book that he edited entitled *Civil Society in the Middle East*, "Societies do not take two tablets of civil society at bedtime and wake up the next morning undergoing democratization."[1] Indeed, some elements of civil society seem to pull them towards authoritarian practices. In spite of the fact that civil society has come to be viewed by most political theorists as the *sine qua non* of democracy, especially in the aftermath of the 1989 collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, there are also those who warn against the abuse of this popular concept. The relationship of the concepts of civil society and democracy with Islam is even more complex. While some approaches bluntly declare the incompatibility of Islam with the other two phenomena, others caution against the overgeneralization of Islamic movements and attract attention to differences among them. Hence, while some Islamic organizations display closed, absolutist and authoritarian tendencies, others point to the possibility of a convergence among civil society, Islam and democracy.

In the first part of the following text, some of the theoretical debates on the relationship between civil society, Islam, and democracy will be portrayed. In the second part, the agendas and views of the three Islamic NGOs in Turkey

will be studied. The overall purpose of this article is to show how an analysis of the Islamic NGOs which display different characteristics can pave the way to a reassessment of the literature that focuses on the dynamics of civil society, Islam, and democracy.

Civil Society-Islam-Democracy

As Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arrato say in their voluminous contribution to the debates on civil society and political theory; "Phrases involving the *resurrection, reemergence, rebirth, reconstruction*, or *renaissance* of civil society are heard repeatedly today."[2] In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet system, the concept of civil society accompanied the democratization processes in these societies. Civil society as a slogan in these contexts underlined its autonomy from the state.[3] The formulation of civil society in such a sloganized format situated it in a zero-sum opposition against a demonic state.

The limitations of mutually exclusive conceptions of state and civil society are evident. This duality was indeed crucial at the time of the anti-communist opposition in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. The nature of this opposition was characterized as anti-political, since it did not aspire to seize and share the power of the state.[4] The state was seen as an ever-hostile entity against which an anti-political civil society was posed as an alternative. Hence, the politics of anti-politics encouraged religious, cultural, professional, and economic movements that nurtured egoism, consumerism and political apathy. Such anti-political politics was diametrically against the state. As the initial excitement over the anti-communist revolutions subsided, a more complex and multi-layered conceptualization of civil society seemed inevitable.

In assessing the relationship among civil society, Islam, and democracy, it is necessary to point to the differences between civil society and political society as well as economic society. In Cohen's formulation, political society — as it differs from civil society — encapsulates political parties, political organizations, and parliaments while economic society is composed of the organizations of production, distribution, firms, cooperatives, and institutions of collective bargaining such as unions, and councils.[5] What distinguishes these actors is that they are directly involved with state power and economic production. They utilize strategic and instrumental criteria in decision-making. Civil societal initiatives, on the other hand, perform in a medium of open communication and normative integration. They try to defend new spaces for the creation of new identities and seek egalitarianism and democracy. They opt for making the institutions of political society more receptive to these new identities and parameters. In short, ". . . the mediating role of political society between civil society and the state (political society sets up receptors for the

influence of civil society) is indispensable, but so is the rootedness of political society in civil society."[6] The relationship of Islam with civil society and democracy is largely determined by the extent of political society's strength *vis-a-vis* the state.

Any assessment of the relationship between civil society and Islam has to take into account Ernest Gellner's argumentative work on this topic.[7] In Gellner's account, Islam is portrayed as one of the rivals of civil society. According to the secularization thesis, societies become increasingly more secular with the advent of industrialization and rationalization.[8] According to Gellner, there is one exception to this rule and that is the Islamic societies. Gellner claims that Islam displays unique characteristics as a religion in terms of its immunity to secularization. Since secularization is viewed as the only way to generate liberal individuals who are the *sine qua non* of civil society, this view rules out the possibility of its existence in the absence of secularization. Therefore, Islam appears to be the "other" or the "rival" of civil society. Gellner's views on the incompatibility of Islam and civil society seem to be based on a universalist as well as an Orientalist view of Islam. They characterize Islam as a pathological religion that hinders movement towards Western societal arrangements. Gellner's views are quite akin to the earlier teachings of the modernization school that generated secularization and modernization projects in countries like Turkey.

The first flaw in Gellner's analysis lies in its assumptions. Gellner assumes that since Islam cannot be secularized, these societies cannot converge with open, Western models. Gellner resorts to the category of secularization as a universal category. Secularization theses that point to positive correlations between industrialization, rationalization and secularization describe a *process*. In Turkey, for example, this process has been turned into a *project* and has come to be identified with civilization at the time of the founding of the Republic. Instead of a means for a more rational societal arrangement, secularization became an end, a *telos*. Such deification of secularization attached to it a teleological as well as a theological significance. In sum, Gellner's assumptions confuse the outcome with the cause by blaming Islam for the lack of secularization. Ironically, another literature exists that singles out the deification of secularization (referred to as laicism) as the responsible agent that prompted the politicization of Islam.[9] Secularization in the form of a project (laicism) paved the way to a dialectical choreography that negated itself by generating its own rival. Therefore, it is possible to argue that it is not Islam that is the rival of the civil society but laicism, i.e., the imposition from above of secularization as a deified project. Hence, contrary to Gellner's view, Islam is not the rival of civil society due to its unique immunity to secularization, but it is the very nature

of the secularization project in Turkey that paves the way for Islam's continuous politicized status.

Secondly, it is misleading to portray Islam as an undivided whole and those who choose to be Muslims as adherents of a homogenous worldview. Liberal and community oriented views coexist within Islamic organizations and at times confront each other. The sheer existence of such confrontations is adequate reason to criticize Gellner's view that presumes the existence of a monolithic Islam. Elisabeth Özdalga has conducted interviews with various women in Turkey who had chosen to wear the headscarf in public. She portrays how these women were, in fact, reflecting and acting like liberal individuals by basing their decisions on their own convictions rather than on external pressures, despite their religious outlook.[10] She suggests that Islamic organizations are not *ipso facto* community-based organizations that deny individuals their autonomy. They may, at times, display the characteristics of an adherence to community life but are not necessarily a *Gemeinschaft*, which is organic, closed, hierarchic, and authoritarian. Özdalga argues that,

> It is true that the headscarf may serve the interests of a community; still this does not always have to be the case. In reality, a rope pulling game between community orientation and liberalism is in progress within the Islamic movement. The verdict as to the incompatibility of their organizations with the structure of the civil society is wrong due to this significant reason.[11]

One of the most significant issues that constitutes a key to resolving the relationship among civil society, Islam, and democracy in Turkey is the debate over women's headscarves. The particular headscarf with religious connotations is called the *türbān* in Turkey, the wearer also usually wears a long coat. *Türbān* has become the emblem of Islamic protest against Kemalism in Turkey, which placed great emphasis on modernizing the outlook of the nation. Women's public visibility was an important element in that outlook. Therefore, political Islamists were not the first to assign a central role to women's public visibility in Turkey. The debates over women's dress has occupied a central place within debates over modernization ever since their inauguration with Tanzimat reforms in the nineteenth century. Yet, it was in the early years of the Republic (when founders began to promote Turkish nationalism and Westernization at the expense of Islam) that a change from Islamic attire to Western clothes became so essential. Western clothes for both men and women came to be viewed as emblems of modernization. Such reform of costumes was also promoted by the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself. These reforms were part of a series of rooted changes in Turkey that did not necessarily result in individualism or feminism of

Republican women. On the contrary, it has been argued that the reforms have constituted fetters in front of the evolution of feminism from below:

> The early Republican reforms constituted an onslaught on existing cultural practices. They created an image of a modern Turkish women who was honorable, chaste, enlightened, and modest. These virtues suppressed her sexuality while highlighting her modern outlook. The women who became products of the early Republican reforms were similar to the *noblesse de robe* (nobility by virtue of dress) of pre-revolutionary France, who joined the ranks of the nobility by purchasing offices and putting on aristocratic clothes. These women of twentieth-century Turkish history became *modernes de robe*, who wore modern clothes and adopted certain Western codes of conduct, but nevertheless remained traditional, especially regarding relations with men and their self-perceptions within the confines of the family. They became simulated images of modernity. Their clothes symbolized the political ends of the male Republican elite. Hence, a state feminism instigated from above inhibited the evolution of a feminist consciousness on the part of these women.[12]

It is obvious that the Republican women in Western clothes are not necessarily modern in terms of their values. They were pulled into the public realm as the images of modernity. Similarly, the *türbān* is not necessarily tied to a traditional and hence submissive worldview, but rather represents activism by these women who resist being used by a modernization project from above. Hence, the *türbān* is a post-Kemalist phenomenon that represents a means for women's re-seclusion in the aftermath of their debut in public life as a result of the Kemalist reforms.

Since the headscarf debate is essential in grasping the dynamics of civil society, Islam and democracy; two of the NGOs that will be examined in this study have been founded by women who struggle for the "right to wear the *türbān*," especially at higher educational institutions in Turkey. The third NGO has more general goals in that it purports to be a "human rights organization."

Before we delve into a portrayal of these NGOs, it is appropriate to explain the criteria with which these organizations are evaluated in deciphering the relationship among civil society, Islam and democracy. The above review that focused on civil society, Islam, and democracy has portrayed certain conventional yet misleading arguments:

> First of all, it is obvious that a stance against the state is not a sufficient criteria in defining the parameters of civil society. Secondly, it is important to pay attention to the difference yet the connection between the civil society, political society, and economic society. Whereas the members of the political society opt for power and members of the economic society opt for money, civil society is distinguished as a realm

that opts for a voice. Civil societal organizations, unlike political parties, for instance, are not there to garner more votes from the citizens but rather to carry certain underrepresented voices into the public realm. Hence, they challenge the very definition of the notion of citizenship. In doing so, they try to widen the realm of political society beyond its narrowly defined modern parameters.[13] Thirdly, it is misleading to suggest the inherent incompatibility of civil society and Islam. On the contrary, one can point to the incompatibility of the onslaught of stringent secularization projects from above and the proliferation of a democratic civil society. It has also been argued that the politicization of Islamic discourses in countries like Turkey in the 1990s stemmed from Kemalist reforms that constituted an onslaught on Islamic ways of life in society. Finally, it is misleading to perceive a monolithic Islam in such societies since there exists fundamental differences among Islamic organizations in terms of their adherence to an authoritarian, community-based structure.

The Islamic NGOs that are studied below are evaluated in terms of the following criteria: First, the nature of the relationship that they have with state institutions and members of the political society is assessed. The critical questions at this point are: Do these NGOs reproduce themselves simply via an anti-state rhetoric? Do they try to influence the agendas of some political parties, i.e., interact with political society? Secondly, the attitude of these NGOs towards the non-Islamic or other Islamic groups is assessed in order to decipher their stance not in terms their own identity but rather to discern their views regarding difference in the broader sense. In the words of Ali yaşar Sarıbay, "If it is possible to refer to a plural Islam, this will evidently invite the concept of the Other as well as ascertain civil disobedience."[14] It is obvious that the second criteria in evaluating the following NGOs contains an attempt to see whether they entail hierarchic, authoritarian, and organic characteristics of a *Gemeinschaft* or contain the seeds of a pluralist and autonomous structure which makes them compatible with democratic principles.

Islamic NGOs in Turkey

Existing research documents a serious increase in the number of Islamic civil societal organizations in Istanbul, especially after 1983.[15] All three of the NGOs portrayed below are "associations" (*dernek*) that have to abide by the rules pertaining to formation of associations enumerated in the 1982 Constitution. According to the Article 33 of the Constitution, these associations must be recognized by state authorities and may be subject to closure due to reasons cited in Article 13. These include the protection of the unity of the state with its nation, national sovereignty, Republic, national security, public order, general peace, morals and health, and public good. Article 33 prohibits one of

the essential *raisons d'etre* of the associations as civil societal organizations, which is to have relations with the organs within the political and economic society, such as political parties and trade unions. This limitation on associations in Article 33 was lifted as part of the 1995 Constitutional revisions. It is obvious that the legal provisions defining the associations have placed priority on *raison d'etat*. The process of democratization entails a transition from *raison d'etat* to process in political systems.[16] In the words of Sarıbay,

> The process of democratization contains a transition from state as a
> community to state as an institution. This entails, at the same time, a
> transition from "being legitimate due to strength" to "being strong due to
> legitimacy." The difference between the two is that the former is based
> on moral values, whereas the latter is based on rational legal rules.[17]

The observations regarding the three NGOs that are outlined below are based on their own published material as well as my long interviews with their presidents and some members. The first two associations have placed the issue of women's headscarf at the center of their agenda. The headscarf debate acquired a politicized momentum in the late 1990s. On February 28, 1997, the National Security Council pointed to fundamentalist Islam as the biggest enemy of Turkish democracy and urged the government to wage a war against it. This has paved the way for the application of stringent measures against the *türbān*. The legal basis for the exclusion of secluded students from the university is based on a decision of the Constitutional Court as well as decisions published by the European Human Rights Commission.[18]

1. **AK-DER** (AYRIMCILIĞA KARŞI KADIN HAREKETİ — WOMEN AGAINST DISCRIMINATION)

The pamphlet that describes the origins, foundation, and aims of AK-DER starts with their motto: "We belong with those who become free as they surrender to God, we neither oppress anyone nor submit to being oppressed." (*Biz Hakk'a teslim oldukça özgürleşenlerdeniz, ne zulmederiz, ne de zulme boyun eğeriz.*).[19] It is also stated that AK-DER is an association that was formed on February 15, 1999 by women who were discriminated against as students, lawyers, medical doctors, college professors, and teachers. AK-DER is defined as a civil initiative by women who agree that the country's problems stem from deficiencies and mistakes in the fields of human rights, the rule of law, freedom, justice and peace. Women joining AK-DER share a responsibility in ameliorating these conditions that pave the way to discrimination against them. AK-DER opts for preventing human rights abuses and discrimination. It tries to raise consciousness about discriminating acts. It particularly aims at preventing all sorts of interventions on women's personal rights (in the spheres of education, work, career etc.), raising the individual consciousness of its

members, aiding in their personal development, increasing their experiences and building a solidarity among them.

Despite all the written positioning against all sorts of discrimination involving women, AK-DER is mainly an association that focuses on the headscarf issue in Turkey. This is quite evident in that their only major publication exclusively focuses on the history of the ban of the headscarf in the public realm in Turkey. This bi-lingual publication (Turkish and English) includes slogans, short texts, quotations from the texts of academics, columnists in Turkey that focus on the headscarf problem as well as hundreds of photographs portraying mostly scenes from headscarf demonstrations. It celebrates the headscarf issue in Turkey by making references to emotional moments in the history of its ban.[20] It is claimed in this book that:

> Turkey is a bottle; Islamic lifestyle and Western lifestyle are like olive oil and water in a bottle. The executives of the Republic always shake this bottle in order to mix these two lifestyles. But, with these practices, they mislead Turkey. The ban on headscarf is the last example of that.[21]

This statement poses the headscarf issue in Turkey as an impossible problem, since it presumes the Islamic and Western lifestyles are mutually exclusive. This tendency towards mutual exclusion seems rooted in the *raison d'etre* of AK-DER. The members of the association were quite taken by an "us versus them" type of thinking in their concept of their identity. This mainly stems from their emergence as a response to oppression. The oppression that they were exposed to had already contributed to feelings of solidarity among the members. In trying to unravel whether the association acted like a closed, organic community, the women at AK-DER were faced with certain questions about the concept of 'community.' One of these women said she sensed a utilization of the term community in a pejorative way in these questions. She said:

> I perceive a negative sense that you attach to the term 'community.'
> On the contrary, the term 'community' has positive connotations for me.
> It makes me think of the warm solidarity that we have with each other.

The president of AK-DER said that they have no connections with the Islamic Virtue Party. More significantly, they have no interest in connecting with them. They seemed more interested in underlining the presence of these women with the headscarf in the public realm. They were not particularly interested in political representation. Rather, they wanted to protect what they called the "personal rights" of women to be active in the public realm as students and in various professions. The ban on the headscarf at universities seemed like the primary motive behind their organization. They appeared to be an in-group, an identity group based on a notion of "us" who derived their strength from their common experiences of oppression. Since they had clearly

stated that they were an association against *any* type of discrimination against women, one would expect them to include in their agenda oppression against prostitutes and other marginal women. When they were asked if they would embrace other marginal women such as prostitutes and bring their problems forward publicly, their answer was quite clear. They said they would open their doors to them and listen to their problems but they simply had no motivation to speak up for them. This was not their *raison d'etre*. They said they were more interested in understanding how and why these women failed to survive within the confines of a more moral society and what made them accept such a low and despised status. But speaking up for them was a totally different matter that would not correspond with their Islamic identity.

Some of the women had begun to use the headscarf when they were in high school or even later in higher education institutions. One of them said:

> When I was young, I had no interest in covering my head. But when I was in high school during the late 1990s, I could not stomach the anti-Islamist feeling in the country. One day on the bus, I heard people saying that the driver should just run over these women in the street with the headscarf. That is how much they were hated. I suddenly began to grow a sympathy for them. Later on, I started to read the Qur'ān and that is how I met Allah. I, then, decided to cover my head. It was a choice I made. It was entirely my decision.

There were also women who covered themselves simply because that was the only lifestyle to which they were exposed. Hence, when they wanted to wear the headscarf, they simply wanted to carry on a tradition with which they were familiar. As one of them said:

> Wearing the headscarf was simply trying to do what I knew best; what I observed in my family. While I was just trying to be the way I know best, I was dispelled from the university. Then I decided to join AK-DER and fight for the women's right to wear the headscarf, since that meant maintaining a lifestyle for me.

The women at AK-DER talked about the "persuasion rooms" at Istanbul University where they were exposed to psychological pressure to discard the headscarf or wear a wig or a beret in order to enter the university. They said they could not even enter Istanbul University as visitors with the headscarf. They chose instead to discontinue their educations. The experiences of the women that I have met compare oddly with the example that Özdalga gives.[22] One woman described in Özdalga's article had decided to discard the veil since she felt her wish to complete her education was more significant. In setting her priorities differently, she also had to face hostility from other students who had not discarded the headscarf and who protested in front of

the university while she walked through the gates "feeling naked and embarrassed" amid the protests.

Clearly, women who joined an organization that promoted the right to wear the headscarf were more the 'hawks' of the debate. They were more interested in their own oppression, which strengthened their cause and gave them a reason to hang on to each other and feel less lonely in a community. This radicalization as a response to oppression made them less receptive towards other women who were also discriminated against. Hence, they were more interested in their identities than in being sensitive to difference.

2. ÖZGÜR-DER (ÖZGÜR DÜŞÜNCE VE EĞİTİM HAKLARI DERNEĞİ — ASSOCIATION FOR THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS)

The foundation of ÖZGÜR-DER was announced by a press conference on March 8, 1999 at its headquarters in Fatih, Istanbul. In its foundation text, ÖZGÜR-DER purports to be an association that aids in the enrichment of higher education opportunities in Turkey as well as informs students about their educational rights in the Constitution, legal texts and international agreements.[23] Yet, the president of ÖZGÜR-DER stated in the text that signaled the foundation of the association that, in response to the extraordinary circumstances that had paved the way to the curtailment of the educational rights of the students who had chosen to wear the headscarf, ÖZGÜR-DER's primary focus would be the headscarf issue.[24]

The women at ÖZGÜR-DER are openly against what they call "modernist feminism." They think feminist ideas have infiltrated Islamist groups. These ideas seek to weaken the solidarity among the men and women in these groups. They are particularly angry with feminist attempts to single out the headscarf issue as an exclusively feminine problem. They reason that since it is women who are barred from entry into the universities and not men, headscarf discrimination concerns mainly women. This has paved the way to some feminist voices who have embraced the headscarf problem as a feminine problem. The women at ÖZGÜR-DER, contrarily, thought they had received a lot of support from their male friends who demonstrated with them at the gates of the universities and who chose not to enter and at times risked losing their educational prerogatives. They do not want to resort to the label of feminism in identifying themselves. In their eyes, this label has negative connotations. They simply think modernist feminists who push for equal rights for women in the public realm are unnecessary. Equality with men is something that they think they already have. One of them said:

> Sometimes, I have to work at the office until it is really late. When I go home, my husband does not inquire into my whereabouts. In fact, he is

very good in taking care of our child. I do not feel any less than him.
Interestingly, my next door neighbor, who does not cover her head,
cannot go out anywhere without her husband's permission. She has
to prepare his meal in the evenings. People think we are traditional
because we wear the headscarf. When I compare myself with my
neighbor, I have to ask this: Who is modern and who is traditional?

These women are very focused on their Islamic identities. They do not
want to hide their right to wear the headscarf behind feminism. They openly
push for an Islamic way of life. They are believers. They like to talk about how
they "met Allah" when they started reading the Qur'ān. They say they believe
in opting for freedom via believing. Their road to freedom is through believing
in accordance with the teachings of Qur'ān. They feel free not because they
can reason but because they believe. This explains their keen interest in
transforming society by influencing the consciences of the people.

The women that I met at ÖZGÜR-DER said they had no interest in
connecting with a political party; they want to be the ones who determine the
parameters of their being. They do not want to succumb to the workings of
a political party. This stance makes them appear anti-political. Yet, they still
consider themselves political. One of them said:

> We do see ourselves as a very political group, not because we want to
> interact with political parties and influence their agendas but rather
> because we are interested in informing people about the discrimination
> we have to face, appeal to their consciences and transform the society.

Their view of politics or "being political" attracted my attention. They have a
grand societal design and no interest in utilizing the parameters of existing
political parties. They view politics as a struggle to win the hearts of the people
and to transform society. While on the one hand, they are widening the realm
of politics, they are paradoxically ruling out the existing political realm for
being corrupt. Their argument, at this point, surprisingly converges with some
of the statist, militarists who want to rule out what they view as the corrupt
political realm. While the arguments of ÖZGÜR-DER represent anti-political
arguments from below, the statist, militarist perspectives are anti-political from
above. I believe both are dangerous currents due to their anti-political
character.

The views of ÖZGÜR-DER on different identities reveal a moralist stance
on their part. In spite of the fact that they feel sympathetic towards women
who are pushed into the margins of the society and who, for instance, have
become prostitutes, they also look down on women who choose such an
immoral way of life. Prostitution out of choice is unacceptable for the women
at ÖZGÜR-DER. They feel the same towards transvestites. When asked if they

would publicly stand by such "immoral" marginal groups if their educational prerogatives were being limited, the answer was very clearly formulated by one of the women at ÖZGÜR-DER: "We will not stand by any movement that morally corrupts the society." It is obvious that while, on the one hand, they openly argue for the lifting of all the prohibitions confronting educational rights in Turkey, they publicly profess an Islamic, moral lifestyle, on the other. They are sympathetic towards difference, yet they do not want to risk their greater cause by giving in to immoral differences. Hence, they do not include the human rights abuses of such groups in their agenda. ÖZGÜR-DER's priorities are very clear. The headscarf ban at the higher educational institutions in Turkey prompted their foundation and became their *raison d'etre*. The more pronounced the ban is the more radical and single issue oriented they become. This group embraces a certain identity rather than difference.

3. **MAZLUM-DER** (İNSAN HAKLARI VE MAZLUMLAR İÇİN DAYANIŞMA DERNEĞİ — ORGANIZATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOLIDARITY FOR THE OPPRESSED PEOPLE)

MAZLUM-DER was founded in 1991 as a human rights association. Among its founders, there were people who were affiliated with both the Islamic circles in Turkey and the Nationalist Action Party. At the time of its foundation, there existed a human rights association in Turkey that was largely dominated by leftists. But the women who were facing the headscarf pressures were not welcome in that association. Hence, MAZLUM-DER was founded as an alternative human rights association that would be sensitive to such issues as well. Interestingly, one of their very first civil disobedience activities was geared towards protecting the rights of the leftists who were left out of the coverage of the amnesty at the time, since they had been convicted under certain articles of the criminal code. The motto of MAZLUM-DER is "On the side of the oppressed against the oppressor" (*Zalime karşı mazlumdan yana*). In addition to its headquarters in Ankara, it has 15 branch offices all over Turkey. The size of MAZLUM-DER's organization is very big compared to the other two NGOs cited in this article. It has an Islamic image due partly to the impact of its founders, and partly to the increasing polarization of society in Turkey in the early 1990s around Islamic and secularist camps.

The president of MAZLUM-DER says that the organization does not assume an Islamic identity itself, but that this identity was given to it by the mass media. He said: "Our image was to a large extent determined by the state." The image of MAZLUM-DER is determined by the state since they protect the rights of those who are oppressed and whose rights have been violated by the state. The February 28, 1997 decisions of the National Security Council were based

on the assumption that Islamism was Turkey's biggest internal enemy. What followed was a series of stringent measures preventing public visibility of Islamic identities in Turkey. As a result, the prevention of secluded female students from entering higher education institutions became an everyday issue during the last three years of the 1990s. MAZLUM-DER stood by these students on the basis of basic human rights violations. This has contributed to its increasing reputation as an Islamic organization. The expression Mazlum (the oppressed) was sometimes referred to as Moslem within Kemalist, secularist circles. The organization with its various branches has lived through various interventions in their activities as well as closures. Yet, it has been able to develop into a full-scale human rights watch organization in Turkey covering issues ranging from the headscarf to discrimination against Armenians and other non-Muslims, as well as Kurds in Turkey, women's issues, lost people, suspicious deaths, and human rights violations in prisons. In fact, MAZLUM-DER keeps a record of such violations in its monthly publication titled *Bülten*. It also publishes year round records of human rights violations in Turkey. MAZLUM-DER claims to be the only organization that stood up for the rights of a liberal university professor in Turkey who was charged with insulting the Republic and the state's military forces in an academic speech. As the president of MAZLUM-DER says:

> If it is the gypsies whose rights are being violated, then, we will stand by them in solidarity. We are on the side of the oppressed against the oppressor. *We try not to identify with the oppressed identities that we protect. This is a very important point in being a human rights watch group.* We seek a criteria for legitimacy for our activities on the basis of international human rights. (Italics added)

MAZLUM-DER tries to relate its stance on various issues to the main political parties in Turkey. The activities of MAZLUM-DER mainly consist of informing political parties, international organizations and others of the human rights violations that they come across. The president of MAZLUM-DER refers to the "sensitivity of a judge and a doctor" (*hakim-hekim inceliği*) in their relations with political parties. They try to invite representatives from all political parties to their social gatherings. Still, they are aware of the fact that they may have more of a chance to carry a human rights perspective to the ranks of the Nationalist Action Party when compared as compared with other human rights associations. They are pragmatic enough to make use of this.

It seems as though there are two limitations on the activities of MAZLUM-DER. First of all, their activities are limited by their immediate concern to carry on an existence as an NGO. This is sometimes made difficult by state authorities, especially when MAZLUM-DER touches upon those issues that they hold very dear at that particular historical juncture. This may jeopardize

MAZLUM-DER's very existence; they may be subject to closures. Hence, the agenda of MAZLUM-DER is sometimes limited due to this concern. Secondly, they are limited by the worldviews of their founders. When asked if they would stand up for the rights of homosexuals and transvestites, the president of MAZLUM-DER smiled and said they would like to but their founders and the member profile would not be sympathetic towards the glorification of such behavior. He said that although it is very likely that they would be criticized by the members in big metropoles like Istanbul and Izmir for not taking a stance in solidarity with homosexuals, he could not count on the same reaction in the other branches. Rather, they would probably be criticized for engaging in immoral behavior if they stood up, for instance, for homosexuals. He also argued that there were negative reactions against homosexuals in the 1998 world meeting of human rights organizations. Hence, world organizations are setting certain priorities as well. This attitude has resulted in a sort of moralism. This moralism seemed like a barrier to MAZLUM-DER's stance as an international human rights watch group and a civil societal organization. Therefore, while an urge to exist poses one limitation on MAZLUM-DER's actions, the moralism of its founders and members poses another. The president of MAZLUM-DER has become a balancing actor who is aware of these limitations and pushes them to their limits as much as possible.

The stance of MAZLUM-DER *vis a vis* women's issues seems quite striking, especially when compared with the views of AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER. The president of MAZLUM-DER referred to the story of the "Saturday mothers" who lost their loved ones during military clashes in the southeast. They get together every Saturday in the Tünel region in Istanbul for public visibility. Yet, they have been systematically harassed by the police. He referred to the mothers of soldiers who died in the same clashes. He referred to women who are murdered by their own male relatives for failing to protect their chastity and sometimes for being friends with other men. He refered to women who get lower wages than their male co-workers. And then he added: Is the headscarf the only women's issue in Turkey? His answer was a clear "no" to this question. He thinks the women's headscarf issue is very important but that there are other issues of discrimination against women as well. This represents a genuine attempt to keep away from absorbing into the identities that MAZLUM-DER tries to represent in the public realm.

MAZLUM-DER's position *vis a vis* the other identities seems quite open except for the moralist dimensions in its worldview that ironically seem tactically necessary for the continuous existence of the organization. Yet, there is a visible relativism in both the general worldview of its president as well as in the MAZLUM-DER's profile in general. There are texts referring to human rights violations in various fields in Turkey in its monthly *Bülten* as well as

theoretical articles on such issues as multiculturalism, nation-state and differences, and the inadequacies of the official Turkish educational system. MAZLUM-DER seems like a human rights organization that has achieved international standards and that tries to keep a relativist worldview as much as it can in the absolute, polarized and compartmentalized ideological climate of Turkey in the 1990s.

Islamic NGOs in Turkey: Between Anti-Political Moralism and Political Relativism

A review of the views and stances of AK-DER, ÖZGÜR-DER, and MAZLUM-DER points to a difference in the worldviews of these Islamic NGOs. First of all, while AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER are mainly organizations formed in response to the discrimination against women who wear the headscarf, MAZLUM-DER posits itself as a human rights organization with a wide spectrum of concerns and sensitivities. This paves the way to an absolutist stance on the part of AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER, while MAZLUM-DER is able to present a relativist profile.

Secondly, AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER do not carry the discriminated identities into the political realm. They portray an anti-political profile. Among the three NGOs, only MAZLUM-DER seems to engage in an effort to lead a harmonious and balanced relationship with the existing political society. The women at ÖZGÜR-DER, on the other hand, view themselves as a very political organization but one that does not opt for existing political mechanisms but rather seeks to transform society by influencing the consciences of the people. Hence, while the women at ÖZGÜR-DER who want to determine their own parameters of existence rather than succumbing to the causes of any political party portray an anti-political image, they also opt for a fundamental transformation of society along Islamic lines. What they oppose is the existing political society. Their opposition is reminiscent of the distaste of the military-bureaucratic elite towards elected representatives of political parties in parliament. Hence, it becomes clear that the problems associated with the Islamic NGOs in Turkey and democratization stem not only from the stance of the NGOs themselves but from the inadequacies of political society itself. The inefficiency associated with political society as well as its corruption paves the way to the conception of an alternative view of politics that is more radical since it is above and beyond political society. This finding lends credence to the argument that Islamic NGOs and democracy are prone to exclude each other in the absence of a viable, efficient political society. Ergun Özbudun, for, instance, points to the nature of the relationship between civil society and political society as follows: "The effect of the civil society over political society does not involve an attempt to replace it but rather inform, observe, supervise

as well as put pressure on it."[25] It is obvious that ÖZGÜR-DER rejects and wants to replace the existing political society.

Thirdly, the views of the three Islamic NGOs differ in terms of their conceptualization of an 'Other.' AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER are more absorbed in the identities that they try to represent. The headscarf issue seems to be their very *raison d'etre*. Hence, they remain oblivious towards other identities even if these address other sorts of discrimination that women face. They openly present anti-feminist stances. The women at ÖZGÜR-DER presented views that were in stark contrast to other women who embrace an Islamic identity. The women who were interviewed in another study, for instance, pointed to a double discrimination that they have to endure; one imposed by the state in terms of the headscarf and the other imposed by the men in the Islamic community in terms of their individual identities as women.[26] They describe their position as one between two centers of power: the state and the community. The women at ÖZGÜR-DER clearly disagree with such a dual positioning of power. They emphasize a solidarity that they feel among themselves and the men in their community and seem determined to not allow feminist jargon to divide them. They evaluate feminism as a divisive ideology that will take the fever out of the Islamic cause. MAZLUM-DER's stance is more sensitive to women's issues other than the headscarf. MAZLUM-DER tries to locate a common area for all the oppressed, whether or not they are Islamic.

Fourthly, all three of the NGOs in this study have at least one thing in common: moralism. They all show a distaste towards "immoral" marginal groups such as prostitutes, homosexuals, and transvestites. None of them wants to stand by their causes publicly. Therefore, moralism seems to be the lowest common denominator of the NGOs in this study. Still, one has to set aside the tactical concerns of MAZLUM-DER in assessing its relations with the immoral others. The president of MAZLUM-DER seems sympathetic towards any cause of the oppressed but does not think that the founder-member profile of the organization is ready to take these causes upon themselves. There are certain priorities in front of them. It was not they who set these priorities but rather the state. They feel obliged to stand by the oppressed no matter what. Yet, they also try not to get absorbed into the identities that they represent. In the course of the past ten years, human rights violations in Turkey have put certain issues to the forefront of their agenda. This was not a choice on their part. In sum, in dealing with the immoral others, they display a more relativist stance than both AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER. By virtue of being a human rights organization, they are more interested in locating a common ground for all the oppressed.[27]

In sum, while AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER appear as single issue organizations who are more absolute and moral in their stances; MAZLUM-DER, by virtue

of being a human rights organization, is more open to difference and politics through the existing channels, as well as being more tactical and less ideological in its profile. I believe the sheer fact that there are such differences among Islamic NGOs is a finding with its own worth. Hence, it is impossible to argue the compatibility of civil society, Islam and democracy without delving into the very workings of these organizations.

Finally, at the end of this study, one cannot help but wonder about the causes of the radicalization of the stances of some of these NGOs such as AK-DER and ÖZGÜR-DER. It is obvious that these organizations were born in response to a very immediate need on the part of Muslim women who wanted to put on the headscarf in the public realm, and specifically in higher educational institutions. State policies treated these women as state servants, although as students they were in a position to receive service from the state. The more frequently they were barred from entering the universities, the more absolute and particular their cause has become. As years go by, they have became oblivious to other types of oppression since the reality in which they find themselves has sunk them into the status of unwanted underhumans. They feel the increasing weight of discrimination personally in most cases. It seems like they are being pressed into the corner of a bottle by tremendous pressure from above. Their public presence inevitably has become explosive. Their public identity has simply been oppressed for years. This has paved the way to their adoption of a more radical stance.

John Locke's insightful words accompanied me throughout the field trips: "There is only one thing which gathers people into seditious commotions, and that is oppression."[28] State authorities and political parties in Turkey have not managed the headscarf issue but rather suppress it and wish it would go away. The headscarf issue is but one representation of the bigger state-politics tension in Turkey. Without a viable political society that has been saved from the shadow of the state, any connection drawn among civil society, Islam and democracy is meaningless. The difficulty in establishing a positive correlation among these stems not from the uniform nature of the Islamic organizations but from the fragility of political society.

Endnotes

1. Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Volume 2 (E. J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996), 6.

2. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arrato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1997), 29 (italics as in the original text).

3. For a review of such views see, Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (The Free Press, New York, 1992).

4. George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (Quartet, London, 1984).

5. Jean Cohen, "Interpreting the Notion of Civil Society" in Michael Walzer (ed.) *Toward a Global Civil Society*, Berghahn Books, Providence, Oxford, 1998), 35–40, esp. 38.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994).

8. For a review of the secularization thesis, see, Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, "Secularization: The Orthodox Model," in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992), 8–30.

9. See, for instance, Bobby Said, "Sign O'Times: Kaffirs and Infidels Fighting the Ninth Crusade," Ernesto Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities* (Verso, London, 1991), 264–286.

10. Elisabeth Özdalga, "Sivil Toplum ve Düşmanları" (Civil Society and Its Enemies) in Elisabeth Özdalga and Sune Persson, *Sivil Toplum, Demokrasi ve İslam Dünyası* (Civil Society, Democracy and the World of Islam) (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları 76, Istanbul, 1998), 97–111, esp. 101. Ruşen Çakır's study provides us with even more examples pointing to the possibility of a compatibility between civil societal developments, Islam and democracy. Some of the women interviewed in his book have left the confines of a closed community and elaborated autonomous worldviews akin to individualism. Ruşen Çakır, *Direniş ve İtaat* (Resistance and Submission) (Metis, Istanbul, 2000).

11. Elisabeth Özdalga, "Sivil Toplum ve Düşmanları", 102.

12. Ayşe Kadıoğlu, "Women's Subordination in Turkey: Is Islam Really the Villain?" *Middle East Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4, Autumn 1994, 645–660, esp. 653.

13. This aim of the civil societal organizations constitutes the basis of the connection between civil society and postmodernism. See, Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve İslam* (Postmodernity, Civil Society and Islam), İletişim, Istanbul, 1994.

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. A. N. Yücekök *et al.* (eds), *Tanzimat'tan Günümüze İstanbul'da STK'lar* (From Tanzimat to Today, NGOs in Istanbul, Tarih Vakfı, (Istanbul, 1998).

16. Andrei S. Markovits and Mark Silverstein, "Introduction: Power and Process in Liberal Democracies," Andrei S. Markovits and Mark Silverstin (eds), *The Politics of Scandal* (Holmes and Meier, New York, London, 1988), 1–12.

17. Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve İslam*, 163.

18. In 1988, a new article was added to the Higher Education Council legislation. Accordingly, students were allowed to cover their heads and necks in accordance with their religious beliefs while registered as students. When the then president of the Republic objected this article, a legislative process began that paved the way to its annulment in 1989. Nevertheless, a new article was added to the Higher Education Council legislation in 1990 (Article 17), which indicates that "provided that they abide by the prevailing laws, all types of costumes are free in higher education institutions." When this article was objected to by a legal suit, the Constitutional Court rejected its annulment. Yet, in its explanation of the rejection, it stated that "this article does not apply to those students with the headscarf." While the secularist groups are banning entry of the students with the headscarf on the basis of this "exception" indicated in the Constitutional Court's explanation, Islamic groups are suggesting that the Constitutional Court is contradicting itself, on the one hand, by not annulling free style of dress for everyone at the university while, on the other hand, bringing an exception for *türbān* in its explanation of the rejection of annulment. The Islamic NGOs argue that it is the decision and not the rationale in the explanation that is binding and such contradictory legislation of the Constitutional Court is against the Article 153/2 of the Constitution. The European Human Rights Commission took a decision in 1993 in response

to the complaints of two students whose photographs with the headscarf was rejected as inappropriate appearances on their diplomas. The Commission declared that when a student chooses to have his/her education in a secular institution he/she should comply by the requirements pertaining to secularism in that institution. The Islamic students ridicule this decision since they argue that no one can freely "choose" to attend a secular institution in Turkey since all institutions are secular by law. In sum, Turkish secularist educational institutions have no alternatives. This makes "choice" a far outcry.

19. This pamplet is reprinted in both Turkish and English in a book/album prepared by AK-DER, *'Baş'üstüne: Fotoğraflarla Başörtüsü Yasağının Yakın Tarihi* (Withpleasure (sic): Near History of Scarf Ban With Photographs), Kırkambar Yayınları, 1999.

20. It is, for instance, stated that On June 27, 1998, the student who graduated from the Istanbul University, Department of Econometrics with the highest grade point average was denied her prize since she had a headscarf. The second runner up who came to the stage said that he/she did not deserve the prize and handed it over to the student with the headscarf. The scene was applauded enthusiastically by the students and the parents. AK-DER, *'Baş'üstüne*, 111.

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. Elisabeth Özdalga, "Sivil Toplum ve Düşmanları," 103–105.

23. ÖZGÜR-DER, *Özgürlük Girişimi* (Freedom Initiative), February 1999, 11.

24. *Ibid.*, 2.

25. Ergun Özbudun, "Türkiye'de Sivil Toplum ve Demokratik Konsolidasyon" (Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Turkey), Elisabeth Özdalga and Sune Persson (eds), *Sivil Toplum, Demokrasi ve İslam Dünyası*, 112–121, esp. 113–114.

26. See, Ruşen Çakır, *Direniş ve İtaat.*

27. MAZLUM-DER's relativist position is reminiscent of the words of a secluded woman who was interviewed by Ruşen Çakır: "If I look at myself, I have been living the headgear pain for twenty years. There are other people who suffer like me; what I have lived through made me feel empathy towards them. Some of these people are in prison, some have marginal views, some are homosexuals, transsexuals, people who have been excluded from the society . . . I mean everyone is suffering one way or another. Pain, ignorance, exclusion, being pushed around is not special to us. I can share the pain inflicted by each blow of the police bat on the flesh of a leftist, a transvestite." *Ibid.*, 31.

28. Cited in Michael Walzer, "The Concept of Civil Society" in Michael Walzer (ed.), *Toward a Global Civil Society*, 1–27, esp. 20–21.