

Thinking critically with Saba Mahmood

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Saba Mahmood made immensely important contributions to the critical understanding of secular power and its operations, without which the field would be significantly impoverished. Tragically cut short by her untimely death, her scholarship offers especially powerful insights into the critical turn in secularism studies: first and foremost that secularism is a modality of governance involved in the persistent regulation of religion and religious subjectivities in order to advance the prerogatives of the nation-state. More specifically, Mahmood conceptualises secularism as an expression of ‘the modern state’s sovereign power to reorganise substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks and quotidian practices.’¹ In her books, she meticulously traces the operations of secularism in their rich anthropological complexity in modern Egyptian society and dissects the dilemmas thereby generated specifically with respect to issues of agency, religious freedom and minority rights.²

Mahmood was central to the group of scholars that built upon Talal Asad’s work and questioned the conventional understanding of secularism as the separation between religious and political spheres, and state neutrality towards religion.³ The new body of scholarship, which we might call critical secularism studies, merged theoretical analysis of secularism as a political arrangement with empirically-grounded research into the effects of this arrangement. Rejecting simplistic narratives of separation, these critical approaches instead trace the complex permeations of the religious and the secular in modern political governance. Secularism is here portrayed as an exercise of sovereign power which entails the ‘fashioning of religion as an object of continual management and intervention, and the shaping of religious life and sensibilities to fit the presuppositions and ongoing requirements of liberal governance.’⁴ The question of how to separate religion from politics thus becomes

a particularly salient issue and specific attention is directed to the tensions and paradoxes generated by the negotiations of this question within particular nation-states.

Mahmood’s contribution to our understanding of secularism has provided a framework for a generation of scholars concerned with the role of secularism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It was partly in response to the inspiration provided by Mahmood that I myself began to study another Muslim majority country, modern Turkey, to ask how the critical framework she developed might help us better understand the complexities of Turkish secularism. In the following reflections on the intellectual and political legacies of Saba Mahmood’s work, I would like, then, to examine how her insights invite us to reconsider some of our basic assumptions about secularism in Turkey and the problems that its operations generate for the exercise of some religious freedoms.

In many ways, Turkey is an appropriate context in which to apply Mahmood’s critical insights. In modernist accounts in particular, modern Turkish history is depicted as an exemplary instance of institutional and cultural secularisation.⁵ Foregrounding the radical secularisation programme that the emergent republic pursued in its first few decades, scholars emphasise the dramatic speed of the modernisation of the legal system, the institutional structure and social norms which the new republic had inherited from the Ottoman era, praising the civic conception of nationalism thereby established as a ‘radical rupture with the Islamic past’.⁶ Emulating the example of the French republic, Turkey’s founders significantly empowered the state to harness religion to advance the political purposes of the new regime. For instance, immediately after the abolishing of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, Turkey established a governmental institution called the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyânet İşleri Başkanlığı) to control and regulate religion

and religious practices.⁷ The Directorate remains one of the largest and most powerful state institutions in Turkey to this day and oversees all issues concerning Islamic doctrine and worship including the training of religious personnel. Given this strictly regulative organisational structure, scholars such as Ahmet Kuru define the Turkish model of secularism as 'assertive'. In this model, Kuru writes, 'the state excludes religion from the public sphere and plays an assertive role as the agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain.'⁸ Against this background of assertive secularisation, the successive electoral victories of Turkey's moderately Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) in the last few decades are depicted as the transformation or 'backsliding' of Turkey's aggressively secular project. An increasing accommodation of religion alongside the civic revival of religious expression is thus characterised as indicative of a transition from an authoritarian to a more (neo)liberal form of secular rule.⁹

Yet the insights from Mahmood's work would urge us to question – I think quite correctly – this commonly provided story of the evolution of Turkish secularism. Indeed, this portrayal does not hold up well in the face of critical scrutiny. A diverse body of literature has recently shown that Turkish secular modernisation involved not as aggressive a 'rupture' with the Islamic past as was often suggested. Scholars have instead demonstrated the pervasive nature of religion's incorporation within the institutions and norms of Turkish nationalism and statecraft since the early days of the republic.¹⁰ The claim that the republican state's dominant impulse has been hostility towards religion has also come to be disputed. While it is true that the Turkish state has persistently sought to control and regulate religion, this secular project did not always take the form of repression or elimination. As revisionist scholarship has shown, Turkey has in fact pursued a consistently pragmatic approach in this regard, accommodating religious values and institutions deemed necessary for the protection of state interests while attacking others found to be dangerous for state sovereignty and security. For instance, to combat the increasing appeal of communism among Turkey's youth, the junta government established after the 1980 coup adopted a cultural program known as the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. The program integrated Islamic val-

ues of obedience and sacrifice within national education while continuing to uphold the controversial headscarf ban in public offices and education.¹¹

Such pragmatism, which has long marked the exercise of secular power in Turkey, raises doubts also about the portrayal of the recent transformations in secular governance as a sharp transition from an authoritarian past. As Mahmood's work persistently reminds us, 'the religious' remains a 'constitutive feature' of secular governance throughout its operations while the particular shape and intensity of its imbrication with 'the secular' may vary depending on particular historical conditions and necessities.¹² Thus, while it is true that AKP rule involved a more accommodating approach to religion within public life, it has continued the modern Turkish state's founding policy that religious sensibilities need to be carefully shaped and controlled to preserve state interests. The most dramatic recent expression of this continuity has perhaps been the colossal crackdown on the Gülen movement – an influential transnational socio-religious movement also known as Hizmet (Service) under the leadership of the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen – whom AKP blamed for the failed coup attempt of 2016.¹³

The imbrication of Turkish sovereign interests with the exercise of secular power is further evinced in the operations of the military. As Mahmood's critical insights would suggest, it is here, in one of the 'most secular' of Turkish institutions, that the interplay between the religious and the secular emerges in its full complexity. The utilisation of Islamic values of obedience and warfare in the Turkish military has been a central pillar of the social and political power of an institution that has simultaneously projected itself as the staunchest defender of the secular regime in that country. Not only does this turn to religion in national defence stand for a salient representation of Turkish secularism's pragmatism when it comes to the roles religion should play in public life, but as we shall see it also poignantly shows how such pragmatism may nonetheless generate challenges for the state's very control of religious imagination and claims to religious freedom.

Turkey has imposed compulsory male conscription since 1927. Since its implementation, the institution has operated as a force of socio-political modernisation. Especially in the early decades of the republic, conscription

served the important pedagogical function of educating the young men of the new nation in the ideals and norms of nationalism and citizenship. To this day, military service continues to serve this civic nationalist purpose and is widely revered as a sacred institution of Turkish nationalism. But in addition to civic-nationalism, the Turkish state educates conscripted civilians in a particular version of Islam during their service.¹⁴ The interpretation produced and disseminated through the conscripts' education involves a highly militarised reading of religious doctrine, emphasising unconditional obedience to the state. A textbook entitled *Askere Din Kitabı – The Book on Religion for the Soldier* – is at the centre of this enterprise. Prepared by the Directorate as early as 1925, the book has since then been through seven editions, the last being published in 2002. Making frequent references to sacred texts and resources such as the Quran and *hadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) alongside anecdotes from early Islamic and Turkic histories, the book presents the Turkish army as a sacred institution and calls on 'Muslim Turks' to faithfully obey the commands of their government and commanders. The primary aim is to present military service as a requirement not only of citizenship but also of Islamic faith and thereby strengthen citizens' resolve and enthusiasm for soldiering.¹⁵ The book also idealises self-sacrifice and frequently invokes Islamic idioms of martyrdom, thereby presenting the national army as an avenue through which to achieve this 'blessing'.¹⁶

Importantly, the military's emphasis on the religious value of soldiering and national defence is reproduced in civilian education. As Sam Kaplan has shown, especially in the aftermath of the 1980s coup, there has been a gradual increase in the mobilisation of Islamic values of martial valour and self-sacrifice in revised school curricula.¹⁷ The historical context of this development is of course crucial. This is the period that marks not only the junta government's embrace of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis but also the onset of the Kurdish liberation struggle in Turkey's southeast. Quickly escalating into guerrilla warfare, the conflict between the state and Kurdish insurgents has claimed thousands of lives, transforming military service into a highly dangerous undertaking. Under pressure to meet the rising requirements of military mobilisation and at pains to justify the loss of civilian lives, the state thus intensified its military recourse to

religious values, thereby demonstrating secular power's attempt to generate the kinds of religious sensibilities that would help citizens respond to the difficult demands politics sometimes places on them.

How then should we interpret this systematic integration of the religious within national and pedagogical institutions and discourses of the state – especially in a country like Turkey that has been criticised for the rigidity of its secular impositions across most of its modern history? Are these moments of 'aberration from secularism'¹⁸ or woefully incomplete approximations of it? Mahmood provides us with a different framework with which to tackle such questions. Rather than approaching these instances as signs of incomplete secularisation or 'third-world exceptionalisms', Mahmood argues that we should see them as 'diagnostic' of what she refers to as 'the dual impetus internal to political secularism – namely the modern state's disavowal of religion in its political calculus and its simultaneous reliance on religious categories to structure and regulate social life, thereby linking the private and public domains that the secular state aims to keep apart.'¹⁹ According to Mahmood, this duality is an inescapable character of secular power despite generating most of its contradictions. A secular state like Turkey therefore could simultaneously uphold and violate norms and requirements of secularism – including the doctrine of the separation of the religious and the secular – so long as such violations ultimately serve the interests of the nation-state. Likening such transgressions of secularism to sovereign exceptions in the Schmittian sense, Talal Asad further points out the pervasive nature of such secular exceptionalism.²⁰ Put differently, like many other nation-states across the globe, by deciding what counts as religion and what its proper exercise should look like, Turkey could invoke the priority of its sovereign rights in this instance and every time it transgresses secular norms. While such sovereign transgressions may strike against secular expectations, critical approaches to secularism thus tell us that they ultimately are 'actualisations of potentialities within secularism, and are thereby integral to its very foundations.'²¹

Importantly, however, as Saba Mahmood points out, a significant consequence of these constitutive entanglements of secularism and sovereignty is that the question of how to separate religion from politics becomes a constant point of 'legal and political contestation' in modern

liberal democracies.²² In her final book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* in particular, Mahmood explores the effects these constant renegotiations have on religious freedoms, emphasising how precarious their exercise may actually become in secular nation states despite ostensible commitments to their protection. Once again, this insight proves useful and appropriate in understanding Turkey's secular regime. The case of a Muslim conscientious objector (CO), Muhammed Serdar Delice, who sought to legally dispute the state's disavowal of the religious legitimacy of his objection to service illustrates how a particular claim to religious freedom in the context of military conscription has recently become the topic of legal and political controversy in Turkey.



While conscientious objection to conscription is considered a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief by international institutions including the United Nations and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Turkey does not recognise this right. In the absence of laws regulating their refusal, COs are imprisoned for crimes that do not correspond to their actions, including desertion, persistent disobedience and alienating the public from the institution of military service. They may be

imprisoned for periods of up to two years if found guilty of any of these charges. Given that conscription is a mandatory citizenship duty, COs are condemned also to a life of illegality even after their release. The European Court of Human Rights describes the subsequent living conditions of released COs as 'civil death', resulting in 'an inability to vote, marry, legally register a child, work, or get a passport.'²³

But despite these difficulties awaiting COs, Turkey has had a small and persistent CO movement since the late 1980s. Unlike the trajectory followed by many other CO struggles in the world,²⁴ Turkish activism emerged as a secular anarchist movement gradually evolving to include other ideological commitments including religious objectors. In addition to a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim objectors began to appear in the mid-2000s. Given the deep-seated Islamic valuation of military service in Turkey, which, as we have seen, the modern state itself cultivated, the appearance of an Islamically grounded opposition to the draft was in many ways surprising and marginal. Yet it also reflected the transformations occurring in Turkey's dissident public sphere partially as a result of the increasing accommodation of religious expression in public life under AKP rule. Delice was thus among the earliest Muslim COs to ground their objection to service in Islamic reason and join the antiwar movement in 2010.

Delice's public declaration of his refusal initiated the vicious legal circle that awaits all COs in Turkey. He was arrested multiple times for other crimes and served short-term sentences during which he experienced harassment and mistreatment.²⁵ When he found out that a military court had sentenced him in absentia to ten months in prison for desertion, he carried his case to an appellate court in 2012. The routine procedure in conscientious objection cases is to disavow the domestic relevance of this internationally recognised right, but, in Delice's case, the appeal court made a surprising exception, and took the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as the basis for evaluating domestic conscientious objection cases.²⁶ Because the ECtHR categorises conscientious objection under Article 9 of the ECHR, which concerns the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, this was a very positive development for the Turkish COs. However despite this important acknowledgement, the Turkish court upheld a narrow interpretation of Art-

icle 9 and argued that its provisions would apply only to those COs who are members of religions that categorically reject military service.²⁷ Comparing Delice's claims to those of Jehovah's Witnesses, the court argued that the latter 'reject military service, because they are part of this group or institution which fundamentally rejects military service.'²⁸ But in the case of Delice, who identifies as Muslim, this group requirement was not fulfilled. 'As a belief system', the court claimed, 'Islam does not reject the use of weaponry, the wearing of uniform, and other provisions entailed in compulsory military service.'²⁹ According to the court, in other words, Delice's claim to an Islamic conscientious objection was religiously inauthentic as Islam does not reject military service or violence.

Insisting that his claim to CO status is based on his religious convictions, Delice opposed the court's reasoning and asked a local mufti to be heard as an expert witness on the matter of the permissibility of conscientious objection in Islamic doctrine and conduct. (In Islamic law, a Mufti is a jurist expert on the Sharia.) His goal was to counter the court's theological interpretation that his refusal to serve was incompatible with Islam. But the court rejected this request on the grounds that only 'scientific' testimonies could be considered accountable evidence and that a mufti's testimony could not be considered scientific. 'The religious sphere', the court argued, 'is intrinsically related to beliefs and is dogmatic, [and] hence any view expressed from this field cannot be based on science and includes subjective elements.'³⁰ The glaring contradiction in the court's reasoning is hard to miss. While claiming that religious assessments cannot be considered determinative in legal proceedings given the intrinsic subjectivity of the religious sphere, the court nonetheless grounded its judgment of the validity of Delice's conscientious objection on its own theological assessment of the irredeemably militarist character of Islam.³¹ That is, despite affirming theology to be inadmissible in the courtroom, the judges asserted as authoritative their own theological opinion as to the inauthenticity of Delice's religious convictions.

The court's position was thus a striking representation of Mahmood's observation about the extent to which modern state institutions are 'embroiled in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice' despite the commitment to separating the religious from the political

in legal calculations.³² As we have seen, complex questions about the interpretation of conscientious objection and militarism in Islamic law and conduct were transformed into legal and political questions in Delice's case, with important consequences for whether Muslim COs could claim religious exemption from military service as some Christian citizens have. Moreover, Mahmood suggested that a further consequence of this politicisation of religious issues could be the intensification of inequalities among religions and their accommodation by the state. In line with such a suggestion, the Turkish court's claim that religious exemptions from service may be granted to Jehovah's Witnesses while denying the same religious freedom to Turkey's Muslims shows how secular governance and law itself can come to determine the religious freedom claims made within a nation state, thereby possibly generating distinctions and tensions in interfaith relations. Given Islam's majoritarian status in the Turkish context examined here, the opinion of the court in the Delice case did not lead to major social tension between Muslim and Jehovah's Witnesses COs. But as Mahmood's analysis of the strained interfaith relations between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt has shown, the secular state's persistent intervention in religious issues and subsequent allocation of religious privileges and accommodations are necessarily prone to intensifying existing tensions and generating new ones.

Thanks to the critical turn in secularism studies as a result of the work of Saba Mahmood, amongst others, we now have a richer and more complex repertoire of concepts and insights with which to analyse the aforementioned paradoxes of secular power. As I have tried to show here, by utilizing Mahmood's insights in my analysis of Turkish secularism and its problems, I find the renegotiation of existing assumptions about secular power's relationship to sovereignty and law to be one of the most important legacies of Saba Mahmood's work. Her thinking will undoubtedly continue to shape our explorations of the paradoxes and inequalities that the operations of secularism generate. But perhaps more importantly, it may also inspire us to think about what we can actually do about them.

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Notes

1. Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.
2. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Mahmood, *Religious Difference*.
3. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Elizabeth Shakman-Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Winnifred Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
4. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 24.
5. See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Halil Inalcik, *From Empire to Republic: Essays on Ottoman and Turkish Social History* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1995); Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964).
6. Binnaz Toprak, 'Secularism and Islam: The Building of Modern Turkey', *Macalester International* 14 (2005), 32.
7. Andrew Davison, 'Turkey, a "Secular" State? The Challenge of Description', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), 333–50; Markus Dressler, 'Making Religion through Secularist Legal Discourse: The Case of Turkish Alevism', in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 187–209.
8. Ahmet Kuru, 'Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion', *World Politics* 59:4 (2007), 582.
9. See Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Jeremy Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
10. Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006); Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi* [The Turkishness Contract] (Istanbul: Dipnot, 2018); Mesut Yeğen, 'Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (2007), 119–51; Aslı İğsız, *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018).
11. Sam Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Sam Kaplan, 'Din-u Devlet All Over Again? The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey Following the 1980 Coup', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34:1 (2002), 113–27; Pınar Kemerli, 'Religious Militarism and Islamist Conscientious Objection in Turkey', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47:2 (2015), 281–301; Serdar Şen, *Silahli Kuvvetler ve Modernizm* [Social Engineering of the Armed Forces] (Istanbul: Sarmal Yayınevi, 1996); Bozkurt Güvenc and Şaylan Tekeli, *Türk-İslam Sentezi* [Turkish-Islamic Synthesis] (Istanbul: Sarmal Yayınevi, 1991).
12. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 22.
13. 'Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt: All You Need to Know', *Al Jazeera*, 15 July 2017; Amberin Zaman, 'Ankara Rounds up More "Gülenist" Military Pilots', *Al-Monitor*, 30 January 2019.
14. Şen, *Silahli Kuvvetler ve Modernizm* [The Armed Forces and Modernism]; Sinem Gurbey, 'Islam, Nation-State, and the Military: A Discussion of Secularism in Turkey', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29:3 (2009), 371–80; Kemerli, 'Religious Militarism'.
15. Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, *Askere Din Kitabı* [The Book on Religion for the Soldier] (Istanbul: Diyanet İşleri Yayınları, 1977), 29–30.
16. Akseki, *Askere* [The Book on Religion for the Soldier], 300.
17. Kaplan, 'Din-u Devlet All Over Again?'; Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State*.
18. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 8.
19. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 25.
20. Talal Asad, 'Trying to Understand French Secularism', in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 494–526.
21. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 8.
22. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 4.
23. Hülya Üçpınar, 'The Criminality of Conscientious Objection in Turkey and Its Consequences', in *Conscientious Objection: Resisting Militarized Society*, ed. Özgür Heval Çınar and Coşkun Üsterc (New York: Zed Books, 2009), 242–56.
24. See Charles C. Moskos and John Whiteclay Chambers, eds., *The New Conscientious Objection: From Sacred to Secular Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
25. In the following discussion of Delice's case, I draw upon interviews I conducted with him as well as legal and newspaper coverage of his case. For a more detailed analysis of his court case, see my 'Refusing to Become Pious Soldiers', in *Contested Spaces in Contemporary Turkey*, ed. Fatma Muge Gocek (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 367–94.
26. War Resisters' International, 'Turkey: Military Courts Recognise Right to Conscientious Objection', *War Resisters' International* (2012).
27. Mine Yıldırım, 'TURKEY: Selective Progress on Conscientious Objection', *Forum 18 News Service*, May 2012.
28. Ekin Karaca, 'Mahkeme Delice'yi Degil Ama Vicdani Reddi Tanidi' [The Court Recognised Conscientious Objection but not Delice], *Bianet*, March 2012.
29. Karaca, 'Mahkeme Delice'yi Degil Ama Vicdani Reddi Tanidi' [The Court Recognized Conscientious Objection but not Delice].
30. Yıldırım, 'Selective progress'.
31. See Winnifred Sullivan's analysis of the tensions faced by secular law while reflecting on issues of religion freedom in *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*.
32. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 2.