Media, Islam and Gender in Turkey

ABE Ruri[*]

This paper deals with the condition of Islamic media and its impact on the minds of people, especially young women in Turkey. Turkey is known as a secular country with a long tradition, but at the same time it has been lead by an Islamic oriented party, AKP since 2002. To put it differently, long lasting secularism in Turkey has been challenged by Islamism, which is gaining influential power.

In this paper I would like to point out that this trend, namely the erosion of secularism on the one hand, and the resurgence of Islam on the other hand, is also taking place in the world of mass media in Turkey. In other words, Islamic media has been gaining in significance in Turkish society. This is one of the consequences of the deregulation and privatization of the Turkish mass media which took place in 1990s.

This article is composed of three parts. Firstly, we will see how Islamic media in Turkey has been developed and become influential. To properly understand the status of Islamic media, we will need to review the history and the features of Turkish media. I will focus on how Turkish media have developed in a predominantly secular tradition and transformed into more varied types of mass media later in the 1990s. During that time, the privatization of broadcasting was being promoted and at that moment, the number of Islamic oriented TV channels and radios was increased on a large scale.

Secondly, I will look at how these Islamic oriented media have been consumed by Turkish people, particularly young women, by referring to a case of fieldwork done in impoverished neighborhoods in Southeast Turkey.

Lastly, I will provide some perspectives to understand the future outlook of Islamic media in Turkey and beyond. By means of satellite, the area where Muslim communities can receive broadcast media has expanded beyond Turkey's borders into Western Europe, where 3 million Turkish migrants are living.

In sum, I intend to illuminate how Islamic media have composed an alternative discursive space and provided nodal points for those people who have been alienated and marginalized by official discourses mediated by secular media.

1. The Development of Broadcasting Media in Turkey

As we watch today's glitzy Turkish TV channels, it may be difficult for us to imagine that Turkey did not have any private TV channels at all before 1990. Nowadays, the number of TV channels is already uncountable. Even an impoverished household can afford to have

---

　* Associate Professor, Sophia University.

a television receiving set. From my experience, if they have to choose between the two, they prefer having a TV to having a refrigerator. This indicates just how much television constitutes an important part of daily social life in Turkey.

Compared to other Middle Eastern countries, Turkish media have enjoyed much more freedom in terms of media ownership and contents, although some taboos still remain. By and large, the condition of media in the Middle East has been greatly transformed. The variety of channels is increasing and media contents have been diversified thanks to the launching of satellite television and the internet. Yet, in most of the Middle Eastern countries, the governments still keep strict control of their country's mass media, particularly terrestrial broadcasting and print media.

1-1 Tradition of Secular Media

Television broadcasting was started in 1968 in Turkey. Until 1991, when private broadcasting came into being, TRT (Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu), the state broadcaster, had been the only television station which was allowed air time.

For more than 40 years TRT has played the role of purveyor of secular, modern and western values to Turkish society. In other words, the Turkish government implemented TRT as a means of promoting national unity and nation building. Relevant to this point, indicate that TRT mediated "diffusion of state official culture" [Aksoy & Robins 1997: 1940].

In this official culture, on one hand TRT had encouraged secular, modern and western values, and on other hand, it had actively excluded what they conceived as un-secular, un-modern and un-western values. According to their understanding of "laiklik," Islamic symbols and practices have been kept out of the "public sphere" mediated by TRT.

Although the resurgence of Islam has become prevalent in Turkey since 1980s, it has not been discussed and reported openly in TRT. When they cover this story at all, they often tend to represent the resurgence of Islam in a negative context as an "un-secular" and "un-modern" movement. However, the coming of private broadcasting into this situation caused quite a stir.

1-2 Privatization of Broadcasting Media in 1990s

Despite the fact that TRT continued to promote "official culture," "real culture," namely, what TRT had not represented as authentic did not disappear. If we compare them, then "official culture" would be "central," while "real culture" would be "peripheral" What I am suggesting here is that although the "periphery" has been left behind, it has formed an important undercurrent. While TRT was the only broadcasting media in Turkey, the "periphery" was an "object" of representation [Aksoy & Robins 1997: 1944]. It did not have its own means to voice itself.

In 1991, the situation changed. At the end of 1991, a private broadcaster, "Star 1" started

broadcasting from Germany by using satellite. At that time, the Turkish government had not authorized private broadcasting, but it was not illegal to receive and watch satellite television channels such as CNN and BBC. Turkish private broadcasters took advantage of this loophole in broadcasting regulations and ipso facto Turkey burst into a new era in terms of broadcasting media. One year later, 6 private TV channels had been established and in 1993 the Turkish government reluctantly had to admit the existence of private broadcasting and eventually legalized it [Akın 2002].

So what kind of impact did private broadcasting have on Turkish society? I think launching of private television in Turkey resulted in a gradual "break down of official culture," if we comprehend it briefly.

Yet in the early 2000s, the development of the Turkish media took another turn. Only 10 years after the legalization of private broadcasting, the private sector in media industry was so expanded that about 70% of the sector was monopolized by one media giant, namely by Doğan Holding [*Economist* 14 February 2002].

Doğan Holding is a huge conglomerate which invests not only the media industry, but also in insurance, banking and the mobile phone business. In respect to its media section, Doğan owns popular press such as *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet* and Kanal D, a major TV channel.

2. Islam and Media in Turkey
2-1 Emergence of Islamic TV Channels and its Meaning

Now I would like to move on to "Islamic media," particularly TV channels. First, I will examine the term "Islamic media." By Islamic media, I mean those media managed or owned directly or indirectly by a pro Islamic party, *tarika* (tarikat in Turkish) and some kind of Islamic organization, such as "*cemaat*." In the early days, when we talked about Islamic media, it was mainly, printed media, such as newspapers or magazines, or even pamphlets with a limited circulation. In the 1990s many Islamic organizations started their own TV channels after the legalization of private broadcasting. Here we term those media which are owned and managed by an Islamic organization as Islamic media, but other terms such terms as "Muslim channel" or "Muslim media" are used to indicate the same thing.

In terms of an Islamic TV channel, what differs from printed media is that their range of influence is much wider in regard to their audience. Printed media has its own limitations in terms of literacy, distribution and readership. Broadcasting media can easily overcome these barriers and reach to wider audience.

I consider electronic Islamic media to play an important part in the resurgence of Islam in Turkey. This is because discourses mediated by Islamic media bring about an alternative public sphere in Turkish society. It is an alternative, as Turkish thought has long been dominated by secular discourses.

In earlier days, Islamic symbols and practices were actively excluded from the "public arena" and such secular media as TRT mediated predominantly "official" discourses. In turn, Islamic media, though its range of influence is still constrained, made what had been "marginal" and repressed, into something public and visible.

2-2 Brief overview of Islamic Media in Turkey

The pioneer of Islamic TV channels in Turkey is "TGRT" which started to broadcast in 1993 from the UK. "TGRT" is a channel owned by İhlas Holding. İhlas Holding is known as the conglomerate in which the well known Naqshbandi *tarika* mainly, invests. İhlas Holding owns Islamic daily "*Türkiye*" as well.

The other major example of Islamic media is "STV (Samanyolu Televisyonu)" sponsored by Fethullah Güllen Cemaati, which is also known as "Nur movement" or "*Nurcu*." (Nurcu is a term mainly used by secular context.) "*Zaman*," a major Islamic daily, is also published by the same organization.

Yet another example is the major Islamic television channel called "Kanal 7," known as the semi-official media of the former Refah Partisi (RP=Welfare Party) and Fazilet Partisi (FP= Virture Party). These are three major Islamic television channels that are viewed nationwide in Turkey.

2-3 Muslim Identity and Islamic Way of Life

I would add two important points useful for understanding Islamic media. First, the Islamic media's potential for mediating Muslim identity. Second, the role of Islamic capital in the rise of Islamic broadcasting media. I will mention the second point later in the coming section.

As Turkish journalist Ruşen Çakır acknowledges, "An alternative market has been created for pious Muslims in a sector which had been conceived as difficult to Islamize" [Çakır 1990: 301]. This alternative market and social space were created to enable Muslim people to have an Islamic way of life. Such a market and social space came into being as a consequence of the deregulation policy since the 1980s and the rise of Islamic capital since the 1990s in Turkey [Özcan and Çokgezen 2003: 2069–2070].

As examples of these phenomena, we can quote Islamic media, Islamic private and prep schools, resort hotels for Muslims, clinics and retail shops such as supermarkets and Islamic dress shops.

These fulfill the demands of people who intend to pursue an Islamic way of life and at the same time enable Muslims to strive to construct a Muslim identity through the act of consuming [Navaro-Yashin 2002; Göle 1999]. To put it differently, consumer culture based on an Islamic way of life has been developing in Turkey and Islamic media can also be understood in this context. Islamic media is not only a media infrastructure per se, but also

meets the demand of those people who intend to be conscious Muslims in terms of their daily media consumption. Furthermore, it gives them the occasion to affirm their identity. In respect to the matter of identity and the contents of Islamic TV channels, I will provide more detailed information later.

2-4 Islamic Capital and Islamic Media

In order to operate a media organization, abundant financial resources are needed, so first and foremost, Islamic TV channels are commercial and most of them are owned or supported by some kind of Islamic capital. In other words, without the backing of capital, operating media is difficult. In this paper I do not intend to venture further into the matter of Islamic capital itself. I would just like to point out that it provides the financial infrastructure of Islamic media.

As one example, we can name "Asya Finans" which has a strong relationship with Fethullah Güllen Cemaati and also "İhlas Holding" affiliated with the Naqshbandi Order. The latter is a transnational conglomerate which operates both in Turkey and Germany. As I mentioned before, these two have major TV channels and are influential in terms of influencing public opinion.

Up to now we have outlined how Turkish media have been developed and how Islamic media have come into existence as alternative media in Turkey. In the following sections, we look into how these media affect the identities of people in Turkey, by mentioning the ethnographic data collected in impoverished neighborhoods in the southeast part of the country.

3. Young women in *Kenar mahalle*, Islam and Media
3-1 Antep, *Kenar mahalle* and Women

In this section we focus on how young women in poor neighborhoods experience and affirm their identity as Muslims while living in a rather peripheral part of the country and how they encounter and react to Islamic television channels.

I did my fieldwork in the early 2000s in a city called Gaziantep, which is located near the Syrian border, where I stayed for one and half years.

From now on, we will refer to the city as Antep, a shortened form of Gaziantep. What is remarkable about Antep today is that the city has been one of the major destinations of rural migrants. This inflow of people into the city was for two main causes. The first was that people originally from rural areas moved to the city to enjoy a better standard of living. As for the second reason, the unrest in the Kurdish area of the region caused massive migration from rural areas to cities in the Southeast region such as Antep and Diyarbakir, particularly in the 1990s.

This lead to the construction of a wide range of peripheral neighborhoods (shanty towns) on the outskirts of these cities. My fieldwork mainly took place in these peripheral neighborhoods. People call the place "*kenar mahalle*" as this is located at the periphery of the city.

The whole *kenar mahalle* appears to be a doughnut shaped place. This is a distinct area inhabited by migrants from Eastern Turkey and the villages from Antep and the neighboring prefectures. The wealthier centre is surrounded by a wide band of impoverished households living at its periphery, which still continues to expand, as new settlements are always under construction. It should be noted that the mobility of women in these peripheral neighborhoods is restricted and the interaction between the city center and these neighborhoods is quite limited.

3-2 Headscarf and Women in *Kenar Mahalle*

Once, the headscarf was not a marker which indicated ones' religious orientation in Antep. Rather it was normal for a woman to wear a headscarf when she reached old-age or was widowed. Rural women and rural migrants have long worn a simple scarf, yet they did not wear it out of their religiosity, it had just been a custom. However, the wearing of a headscarf has gained particular significance in accordance with the rise of political Islam in Turkish society since the 1980s. Namely, the headscarf has become a symbol for one's religious identity.

In secularist Turkey, the act of veiling has always been a matter of controversy. It has long been prohibited for female students and public employees to veil their heads in public institutions, such as schools and universities.

Along with the resurgence of Islam, the way women cover their heads has been transformed. Once the wearing of headscarf by *kenar mahalle* women was associated with the image of "rurality," as they covered their heads with simple cotton scarves. Yet now they strategically employ veiling as a means to present themselves as "conscious Muslims" by wearing more elaborated types of scarves. New types are acrylic. Women try not to leave any of their hair showing and at the same time they wear coats called "*manto*" in Turkish in order to cover their body lines.

Seen from a secularist view, "veiled women" are a symbol of the "Islamic threat" to the secular order. From a Muslim women's perspective, however, veiling is actually an expression of identity, not necessarily a symbol of oppression or "backwardness."

Let's see how veiled women in *kenar mahalle* think about the veiling issue. A veiled woman in her 30s gave the following remarks, "I think that the government is afraid of the religion. Does the government regard those who cover their heads with a scarf as brainwashed? I believe religious practice is necessary for maintaining our spiritual tranquility.

My younger sister gave up going to college because of the scarf problem. It is beyond my understanding why the government does not allow wearing it."

Another veiled women said, "I wanted to go to college, but I gave it up because of the scarf problem. When the television reported the clashes between demonstrating female students and the police in major cities, and I saw how these women were treated by the police, I was uncomfortable about going to college and my family opposed my going as a covered woman."

These remarks show that veiled women actively present their identity as conscious Muslims by the act of veiling and at the same time television may affect their construct of identity.

3-3 Islam and Media in *Kenar Mahalle*

Now, I'd like to move on to how women in *kenar mahalle* relate themselves with the media and its representation. In the beginning, let's see how women react to the "veiling issue" on television reporting.

The issue of veiling has become more intense as commercial television has paved the way for the visibility of Islam on television since the 1990s [Öncü 1994]. To put it another way, the introduction of commercial television in Turkey caused a situation in which the "veiling issue" or "scarf problem" (başörtüsü tartışıması) came to be discussed publicly by the media. Namely, Islam came to be an "issue" in television reporting, and at the same time, it reached people in every walk of life regardless of literacy.

The way commercial television represented the veiling issue brought about another consequence. That is to say, it emphasized the confrontational relationship between those who sided with secularism and those who supported Islamism. It caused the dispute to become a public issue, and people were challenged to make their choice and define where they stood [Öncü 1994: 34]. Namely, people were obliged to clarify their position, whether they were secularists or Islamists.

As we have seen before, Turkish private television has developed dramatically over the last 20 years and the deregulation of broadcasting enabled Islamists to have their own channels to reflect their views. How far their programs are Islamicly oriented depends on the stations. Actually, despite, their orientation being Islamic, many stations have entertainment programs in order to get a higher audience rating, yet they also offer some programs, not necessarily in primetime, which meet the demands of conscious Muslims.

For instance in case of "Kanal 7," "Islam and Life" is known as a religious program in which a professor of theology gives advice on daily life to the TV audience. "Lighthouse (Deniz Feneri)" used to be a popular program in which an envoy visited an impoverished village with food and exchanged views with the villagers.

Another remarkable feature of Islamic television channels is news reporting. It is worth noting that the "Islamic" channels tend to focus on the news and the incidents occurring in other Muslim countries compared to "secular" commercial channels and this helps to strengthen the "solidarity" among Muslims across borders.

Leyla, a teenage woman who migrated from an eastern town, Van, to Antep is one such woman who usually watches reporting on "Islamic" channels. She was very much impressed by the incidents in Palestine as well as Chechnya where "fellow" Muslims suffered damage within ongoing regional, ethnic conflicts.

I do not argue that the sympathy *kenar mahalle* women have for fellow Muslims and their tendency to have an Islamist identity is engendered only by their exposure to television. However, it is meaningful to point out that we should not dismiss the influence of the media, as television serves as a powerful means for *kenar mahalle* women to connect themselves to society. It is particularly because they have limited mobility in the outer world. Therefore, television becomes a significant source of information and "normative knowledge" of Islam for them to constitute their own social identity.

4. Conclusion: Imagined Communities of Muslims in Turkey and its Beyond

The influence of Islamic media is felt not only in Turkey, but has also expanded its effects to Central Asia and Western Europe since 1996, thanks to the launching of the satellite, "Turksat 1." There are about 3 million Turkish migrants living in Western Europe. Among them as we know, more people have come to adhere to the resurgence of Islam and come to identify themselves as "conscious Muslims."

When I visited Berlin in Germany for field work in 2007, I found that conscious Muslims living far away from Turkey also watch Islamic television selectively. Mr. Deniz, the owner of a printing company who migrated to Berlin 1973, told me that he likes to watch Turkish Islamic television rather than other Turkish secular channels and German television. He prefers Islamic channels as he thinks the news reporting is more liberal to Muslims and they actively report incidents in Muslim countries other than Turkey.

He said that 9.11 was the turning point when he came to identify himself as a "conscious Muslim," as oppression toward Muslims in the West heightened at that time. Thereby, he came to be interested in what was going on in Muslim countries all over the world.

Now the cases of both Leyla in Antep and Deniz in Berlin show that a network mediated by Islamic media creates a kind of community, which connects the minds of Muslims across borders. These people are rather "peripheral" in their actual settings. Leyla, who only graduated from elementary school and worked for a local factory, and Deniz, living as a migrant worker in Germany, both expressed outrage against the German authorities because they treated Muslims as if they were terrorists.

In closing, I would like to emphasize the following important points. First, the introduction of commercial broadcasting as well as Islamic television channels has come to represent the social identities of those people who have been alienated from official secularism. They offer an alternative discursive space in which people can openly dispute about Islam. What I have pointed out indicates that the transformation in media systems has also affected the change in the construction of social identities in Turkey.

Second, we have seen those who used to be "peripheral" like Leyla and Deniz, reaffirm their identity as Muslims through the act of watching Islamic media. By watching these TV channels, their identities as Muslims are revived and reinforced.

To put it another way, Islamic media broadcast to virtual communities of Turkish Muslims beyond national borders. Although they remain as invisible networks, they have certainly gained in significance.

References

Aksoy, A. and K. Robins. 1997. "Peripheral vision: cultural industries and cultural identities in Turkey," *Environment and Planning* 29, pp. 1937–1952.

Çakır, R. 1990. *Ayet ve Slogan*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları.

Göle, N. (ed.) 1999. *İslamın Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları.

Navaro-Yashin, Y. 2002. *Facets of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ogan, C. 2001. *Communication and Identity in the Diaspora*. Langham: Lexington Books.

Öncü, A. 1994. "Packing Islam: Cultural Politics on the Landscape of Turkish Commercial Television," *Public Culture* 8, pp. 93–106.

Özcan, G. and M. Çokgezen. 2003. "Limits to Alternative Forms of Capitalization : The Case of Anatolian Holding Companies," *World Development* 31, pp. 2061–2084.