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Book Excerpt: Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century

Gözübenli, Abdullah Sencer

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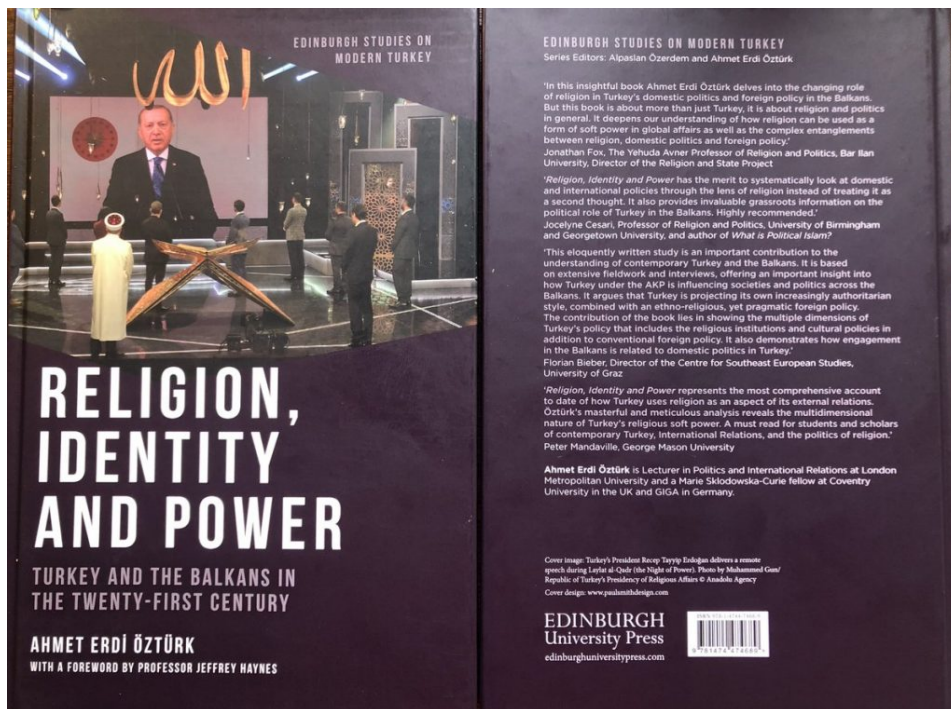
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BOOK EXCERPT | Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century

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February 18, 2021



Power, religion and identities are now unified in Erdoğan's persona

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, Author of Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century

Turkey's return to the Balkans, initially seen as a useful supplement to the EU and the US, especially among the region's Muslim populations, has turned into a threat to Balkan countries' secularism, security, and sovereignty with Erdoğan's personal ambitions in the region.

Turkey's new foreign policy a.k.a "Erdoğan's foreign policy" in the Balkans promotes a "neo-Ottoman" agenda, aimed at expanding its influence in western territories of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey exports Islamism under the guise of cultural cooperation. It also seeks economic advantage, using business as leverage to consolidate its "national" interests.

A recently published book, Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century, tells the story of Turkey-Balkans relations with a view to the role of religion and Turkey's modern-day policies under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reports BIRN's flagship English-language website Balkan Insight.

“First, the book analyses Turkey’s activities in the region from the late Ottoman era until nowadays, using Albania, Bulgaria and North Macedonia as case studies. This is related to area studies and understanding the modern politics and international relations,” said Author Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, an associated professor of politics and international relations and Marie Curie Fellow at Coventry University and London Metropolitan University, in an exclusive interview with Sarajevo-based Turkish journalist Hamdi Firat Buyuk from BIRN.

Although the book has only been published very recently by Edinburgh University Press, it is already being touted as an important addition to Turkey-Balkan studies, experts commented.



*Ahmet Erdi Ozturk (Author of Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century)
PC: Personal Archive*

“Turkey intervenes Balkan countries’ domestic politics under its new foreign policy, which aims to establish hierarchical relations, distancing itself from the West and its values. Turkey now divides Muslim and/or ethnic Turkish parties, establishes new political parties when it sees it necessary or tries to influence elections of local Islamic Communities.”

Earlier on, the BESA party in North Macedonia was openly supported by Turkey’s ruling party AKP as part of Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy agenda. Erdogan’s goal was to use BESA as a first step in the “conquest” of predominantly ethnic Albanian Muslims of North Macedonia by using ethnic and political problems between Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. In their first elections five years ago, they won five seats in the Parliament – more than the number of all Turkish MPs in the Parliament.

As a result of key political misjudgments and the division of the BESA party into Albanian nationalist new “BESA” and openly pro-Erdogan and Islamist “Alternativa”, Erdogan turned his face again to the Turkish community in the country. The only Ankara-backed ethnic Turkish political party out of three is also the only ethnic Turkish political party that could not enter the parliament in the last elections.

BIRN reported that Ozturk started to research for his book in 2014 and at the time was planning to cover the entire region. “The book explains religion, identity and power politics in state relations through Turkey and the Balkans, and beyond that it explains what religion, identity and power mean for the modern state via the use of Turkey and the Balkans as a testing ground,” said Ozturk, BIRN reports.

“However, there are more than 10 countries in the region with very different characteristics. Therefore, I decided to choose Albania, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which are all from different backgrounds, as my case study,” he explained.

Buyuk reminded in his piece that all three countries have multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, citing Ozturk that, Muslims in Albania represent the most Western-oriented form of Islam, while North Macedonia is a former Yugoslav republic and Bulgaria has the largest ethnic Turkish minority.

“These three countries invited Turkey and its influential religious state apparatus into their countries. Therefore, they asked the Turkish religious authority, the Diyanet, to open branches in their countries,” Ozturk added, terming this as Turkey’s “return to the Balkans”, BIRN reiterates.

According to Ozturk, the main reason for this invitation was Turkey’s secular outlook and way of handling the relationship between religion and politics in the early 90’s – unlike its role today under Turkey’s Islamist President, Erdogan.

BIRN’s article reiterates that the “return” of Turkey to the Balkans totally depends on one man who solely shapes the country’s contemporary politics and foreign affairs and after ruling the country for 19 years, Erdogan has also shaped Turkey’s role and relationship in the Balkans. “Power, religion and identities are now unified in Erdogan’s persona,” Ozturk noted, cited by BIRN.

“Turkish soft-power institutions, such as the aid agency TIKa, the Yunus Emre cultural centres, scholarships, the rising role of the Diyanet and Turkey-sponsored state and private media houses in local languages, in addition to mediation attempts ... significantly increased Turkey’s role, and made Ankara and Erdogan very visible in the Balkans,” Ozturk explained in his interview with Buyuk.

The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) is a vehicle through which Turkey advances its ideological agenda as the vanguard of Turkey’s ruling party AKP. TIKa runs a parallel and complementary foreign policy to official state institutions, coordinating with Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and the Diyanet to promote the AKP’s Islamist agenda.



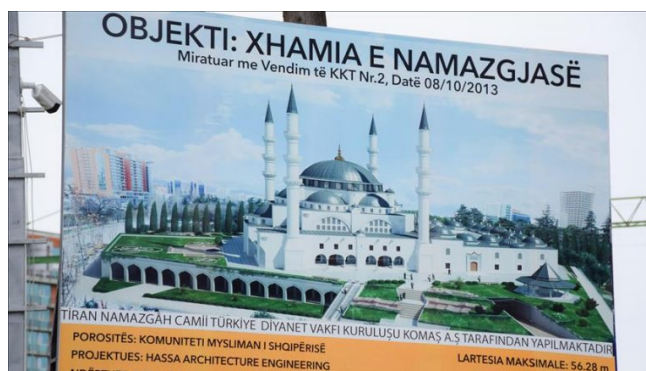
Erdogan’s secret millions in Kosovo: Erdogan “launders millions by building mosques in Kosovo”

TIKA operates in the fields of agriculture, health and education while most TIKA funds are used to restore Ottoman monuments and build mosques. Despite its extensive activities, Kosovo-based Albanian-language daily Zeri reported that the Central Bank of Kosovo has logged only 2.7 million Euros transferred by TIKA to its Kosovo account between 2009 and 2014. TIKA transfers most funds in cash with no official record.

“These policies further fragmentate the Balkan people and particularly its Muslims who were neglected for many years. This creates a love-hate dilemma about Turkey’s role in the region and about Erdogan. Erdogan’s Turkey is becoming a threat to Balkan countries’ secularism, security and sovereignty.”

Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, Author of Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century

The book argues that in parallel with Erdogan’s rising authoritarianism, the government’s crackdown on critics, especially after a failed coup attempt in 2016, its souring relations with the West and use of the Balkans as a playground to challenge the EU, have all hanged the country’s perceptions in the Balkans.



The Great Mosque of Tirana or Namazgâh Mosque that costs around 30 million euros and financed by the Turkish Diyanet

This brings to mind a saying that is often heard around Tirana: “Erdogan thinks that by constructing mosques he will force the Balkans whatever he wishes to do. But the truth is: the direction of the Balkans is Europe in the West. The direction of Turkey is Russia in the East. The man who walks backward cannot lead the man who walks forward.”

“Some groups are pleased with Turkey’s religiously fuelled approach, while others are seriously perturbed. I prefer to define Turkey as an ambiguous actor that has been instrumentalising its power and impact resources in hybrid ways,” Ozturk concluded his interview with Buyuk.