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Gizem Zencirci

Civil Society's History: New Constructions of Ottoman Heritage by the Justice and Development Party in Turkey

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Gizem Zencirci

Civil Society's History: New Constructions of Ottoman Heritage by the Justice and Development Party in Turkey

1 Keriman¹ was a middle-aged woman who worked as the manager of a secularist *vakıf* that focused on providing disadvantaged urban youth with access to educational and health services. During our 2009 interview, she told me about some of the recent changes she had been observing at the *Vakıf General Ministry* [*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*] (VGM). Whereas previously the VGM mostly stuck to routine investigations, it recently begun to show an interest in the activities of private *vakıfs* and invited managers and volunteers to various conferences, workshops and meetings. Although Keriman had been receiving invitations for the past five years, she had only recently decided to attend a *Vakıf* Week Celebration with another volunteer. From the moment they entered the conference venue, however, they felt different from the other participants. There were only a small number of women in attendance and, unlike Keriman and the other volunteer, most of them were wearing a headscarf. Most of the male participants also were also dressed in conservative attire and had beards or moustaches. When a panel on the history of Turkish *vakıfs* began with a prayer and focused exclusively on the accomplishments of the Ottoman period, the two women left the conference venue at once. Keriman explained that this incident was the result of the “post-1980 political climate” of Turkey and continued:

For example, the other day a man from the VGM came for his routine inspection. From his appearance, it was obvious what the political views of this man were... he had a thin moustache; it was shown in his demeanour. Right before leaving, he said: “I have never seen such a good, hardworking *vakıf*, you are just like an Ottoman *vakıf*, you have built one just like those.” The man meant well, he said this to celebrate us, but I was barely able to contain myself.

2 Many different points emerge from Keriman's statements: that she was a secularist-Kemalist, that she disapproved of what she perceived to be the Islamization of civil society, and that she felt allegiance to an alternative network of civic organizations. For her, being likened to an Ottoman *vakıf* was not a compliment, but an affront. Keriman was responding to a specific historical conjuncture in which conservative actors portray Ottoman *vakıfs* as a cultural heritage to be resuscitated, revived, and preserved by contemporary civil society organizations. In contrast, Keriman did not consider Ottoman *vakıfs* to be such a model for Turkish civil society.

3 In this article, I argue that the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) neo-Ottomanist mode of heritage production has consolidated a collaborative model of state-civil society relations in Turkey. After its election in 2002, the JDP has reproduced Turkish national identity along Ottoman-Islamic lines and within such a conjuncture *vakıfs* have emerged as the key inspiration for the new Islamist political-intellectual elite. The JDP presents the Ottoman Empire as a *Vakıf Civilization* and constructs a new discourse of national heritage. This new heritage discourse has not only changed ideas and practices about the Ottoman past, but has also played a significant role in depoliticizing Islamic civil society.

4 This argument is substantiated by archival, textual, and ethnographic data collected between August 2009 and July 2010 in Turkey. During this period, I interviewed *vakıf* managers, volunteers, and donors and participated in a number of social and charitable events organized by these institutions. Although, I situate these conversations against the historical background of the development of Turkish civil society and the transformation of political Islamism, the analysis primarily focuses on the post-2002 period in which I argue that a new understanding of Ottoman “civil society” has emerged due to the JDP's neo-Ottomanist mode of heritage production.

5 The article will proceed as follows: firstly, drawing on civil society in the Middle East literature I will highlight the significant role played by heritage politics for understanding the prospects of civil society in countries like Turkey; secondly I will provide historical information about associations [*derneks*] and foundations [*vakıfs*] and discuss how alternative approaches to Ottoman heritage have shaped the politics of civil society during the 1990s; finally, I illustrate how the transformation of Islamism into a neoliberal-conservative political movement has rearticulated notions of Ottoman heritage in the post-2002 period. I illustrate that the *Vakıf* Civilization rhetoric has emphasized a collaborative state-civil society relationship, thereby serving to depoliticize the democratic potential of *vakıfs* and *derneks*. This argument relies on empirical evidence collected in 2009-2010 in the archives of the VGM, the National Library of Turkey and various other publications and newspaper articles as well as interviews with civil society actors.

I. The Effects of Ottoman-Islamic Heritage on Turkish Civil Society

6 The study of civil society in the Middle East has generally been divided between culturalist and institutionalist explanations. First, often seeking to provide an answer to the question of why a “democracy deficit”² exists in the region, scholars have argued that Islamic religious beliefs, legal systems and institutional structures have prevented the emergence of a civil society independent from the state (Gellner 1994; Kuran 2012; Mardin 1969). As a response to these unenthusiastic claims, others have traced the origins of civic life to the Ottoman period, pointing out that vibrant associational life that was centred around *vakıfs*, guilds, and Sufi orders, and the diverse social, political, and economic functions performed by civil society organizations (CSOs) in contemporary Muslim societies (Ismael and Ismael 1997; Norton 2001; Hoexter 2002; Achilov 2013). Despite disagreeing on what such a heritage entails, both of these culturalist frameworks understand civil society as historically fixed heritage. In contrast, scholars who have considered the question of civil society from an institutionalist framework of analysis argue that an understanding of the real challenges faced by CSOs in the region is obscured by the concentration on Ottoman / Islamic heritage. They suggest that the focus should be on the ways in which repressive states seek to control, co-opt, and constrain political activism and the types of political strategies that may be available to CSOs within these restrictive political opportunity structures (Wiktorowicz 2000; Yom 2005).

7 Rather than treating heritage as a fixed phenomenon, this article investigates the ways in which heritage discourse is constructed by political elites and the state in order to redraw the boundaries of permissible civil society activity. The analytical framework of this study is based on an understanding of national heritage as a socially constructed phenomenon as opposed to a fixed-cultural essence (Brett 1996; Mitchell 2001). As Stuart Hall (2005: 25) argues, “Heritage ... is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory.” This perspective highlights the key role played by heritage politics in constructions of national identity.

8 In Turkey as well, political elites use distinctive articulations of cultural heritage in order to attain political legitimacy and popular support. Although this distinction has become less central in the past couple of years, Turkish politics is still largely polarized between secularist-Kemalist and conservative-Islamist political elites (Göle 1997; Somer 2007). In addition to class-based and religion-related disputes, these two political elites have also disagreed about the cultural-historical parameters of Turkey’s national heritage. Secularist-Kemalists generally celebrate pre-Ottoman and early Republican heritage and reject the significance of the Ottoman past (Çolak 2003; Çetin 2004; Çağaptay 2002; Özyürek 2006). In contrast, Islamists, embrace the contributions of the Ottoman heritage and seek to imagine Turkish culture in a way that corresponds to this heritage discourse (Bartu 2001; Çınar 2005; Çolak 2006; Fisher Onar 2009; Öncü 2007; Mills 2011; White 2014).

9 Disagreement over Turkey’s national heritage also shapes the domain of civil society. For example, since the early 1990s, much of scholarly concern has focused on the “weakness” of civil society in Turkey. Key debates have focused on the types, quality, and effectiveness of

CSOs, investigated the impact of the Europeanization process, and have sought to uncover the nature of state-civil society relations and to highlight prospects for democratization (Diez *et al.* 2005; Kadioğlu 2005; Kuzmanovic 2012; İçduygu 2011; Işık 2012; Şimşek 2004; Turam 2004; Yılmaz 2005; Zihnioğlu 2013). Nevertheless, the ways in which state-civil society relations have been governed by shifting notions of Turkey's national heritage has not been examined in depth.³ For example, secularist-Kemalists generally attribute the “weakness” of Turkish civil society to the Ottoman heritage of religious associational life, which they argue was characterized by authoritarian, repressive, and intolerant tendencies. In contrast, Islamists claim that the Ottoman heritage of pluralist, tolerant, and multicultural civil society was destroyed by the authoritarian reforms of the early republican Kemalist regime. The next section provides a historical background on Turkish civil society before moving on to examine how shifting interpretations of Ottoman heritage have shaped the terrain of civil society in the post-1980 period.

II. A Brief History of “Civil Society” in Turkey: *Derneks* and *Vakıfs*

- 10 In general, two different types of organizations are included in studies of Turkish civil society: associations [*derneks*] and religious endowments [*vakıfs*]. *Derneks* are legal entities that are created by individual members who come together with a common purpose, while *vakıfs* tend to be philanthropic organizations which require the endowment of a certain amount of money for a specific social cause. These organizations may have secular or religious missions, engage in various forms of political activism or charitable endeavours, and may have pro-democratic or polarizing tendencies (Bikmen and Meydancıoğlu 2006: 37-39).
- 11 Turkish *vakıfs* and *derneks* are regulated under different legal-institutional structures which have a long history predating Republican Turkey, its origins going back to the late Ottoman Empire. Despite this long history, it is important to note that, the meanings and practices of *vakıfs* and *derneks* were subject to change throughout modern Turkish history. Thus, whether or not these organizations could be considered a part of “civil society,” even before the advent of the term, is a controversial topic. For this reason, as Kuzmanovic argues, in Turkish civil society studies, a distinction is often made between the pre-1980 and post-1980 era, or the “new history of civil society and a long history of associational activities” (2012: 11). The following historical background on these two organizations, therefore, should not be taken as a linear history of civil society in Turkey, but rather should be read as the historical context of two local associational forms, which later came to be redefined as CSOs.
- 12 Created in 1923, the new Turkish Republic inherited the legal-institutional structure of *vakıfs* and *derneks* from the Ottoman Empire, and proceeded to eradicate the former and restrict the latter. According to Islamic law, *vakıfs* are endowments in perpetuity: when a property (a road, a bridge, a water fountain, a school building) is transformed into a *vakıf*, it entails that the owner has given up his / her right to ownership. During the Ottoman Empire *vakıfs* performed a variety of functions. *Vakıf* buildings assisted in the colonization and urbanization of newly conquered lands; *vakıf*-makers (who were usually members of the elite) were able to acquire and retain their property and land; and these *vakıf*-complexes were often central to the provision of healthcare, shelter, and poor relief to surrounding communities.⁴ Despite the relative financial-administrative independence of these institutions, the emergence of the modern state, increasing European involvement in Ottoman territories, and financial difficulties led to their eventual centralization under the Ministry of Evkaf [*Evkaf-i Hümayun Nezareti*] created by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826 (Barnes 1986; Çızakca 2000; Özaral 2012). From 1923 onward, the new Turkish state continued with the confiscation of *vakıf* properties and lands. A *Committee for the Abolishment of Vakıfs* was created in 1937 to oversee the sale and transfer of *vakıfs*. The *Evkaf-i Hümayun Nezareti* was transformed into the VGM and this ministry was tasked with the management and oversight of both Ottoman *vakıfs* in addition to those created after the foundation of the Turkish Republic. The complete overhaul of the *vakıf* system was an important part of the Kemalist state led development plan and the secularization of socio-economic life. The dismantlement of *vakıfs* went hand in hand with the

ban on religious communities, Sufi orders and brotherhoods as a result of the Law Concerning the Closing of Religious Convents and Communities, 1925. From the perspective of secular Turkish nationalism, these religious associations were seen as an impediment to modernization and were not considered part of “civil society.” As a result of the restrictive legal-institutional structure, only a very limited number of *vakıfs* were created during the early Republican era (Singer 2011: 564).

13 In contrast to *vakıfs*, *derneks* have a shorter history in the Ottoman Empire. As a response to the 1908 Young Turk revolution, the Second Constitutional Era began with the introduction of the 1909 Ottoman Law of Associations [*Cemiyetler Kanunu*], which governed civic communities, political parties and workers' groups (Toprak 1983). The relative liberal atmosphere of the Second Constitutional Era, however, dissipated during the nation-state building project, which did not tolerate political opposition. The new Turkish state did encourage the formation of a variety of pro-regime organizations such as public employee associations, charitable groups and worker's cooperatives. But organizations such as the Philanthropy-Lovers Association, the Children's Protection Society and the People's Houses are best considered as “auxiliary organizations of the party state” (Buğra 2008: 147). Instead of being a voluntary manifestation of grassroots activism, the main function of these organizations was the creation of an “active society” that would voluntarily support the “the notion of a strong state, secularist developmentalism and the modernist project” (Keyman, 2006: 26). Thus, the patriotic associational-philanthropic spirit of these organizations could hardly be considered as an example of an autonomous “civil society.”

14 Yet, despite the restrictive political atmosphere of the early Republican era, Turkey witnessed a significant growth in the number of associations after the transition to a multiparty system in 1946. Turkish people took advantage of the liberal political atmosphere brought about by the 1938 *Cemiyetler Kanunu*: by 1972 there were 45,000 associations in Turkey, compared to 2,000 in the 1950s (Toksöz 1983: 377). The number of *vakıfs* also increased after the introduction of the 1967 *Vakıf* Law which has enabled the survival of this institution, albeit in a significantly new form (Çızakca 2000: 90; Zencirci *forthcoming*). During the 1970s, *vakıfs* were redefined as private philanthropic foundations and a total of 600 new *vakıfs* were created between 1967 and 1980.⁵ This decade was also marked by violent confrontations between extreme left and right wing movements. *Derneks* were especially involved in left-wing student and labour union activism. The political violence of the 1970s left an enduring mark in the Turkish national psyche, and shaped the ways in which political opposition was managed in the decades that followed this tumultuous era.

III. Neo-Ottomanism and the Remaking of Civil Society in the post-1980 period

15 In addition to the liberalization of the economy, a dramatic shift in the perception and portrayal of the Ottoman Empire occurred after the 1980s. In contrast to the heritage discourse of secular nationalism which sought to disassociate Turkish national identity from Islam as well as the Ottoman past, a new understanding of national identity referred to as the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” emerged (Çetinsaya 1999). This new construct of national identity deployed innovative constructions of Ottoman heritage towards solving Turkey's present problems.

16 One of the key consequences of this new notion of national heritage was the expansion of *vakıf* activity. The 1983 Law of Associations (#2908) made it cumbersome to organize under the legal category of *derneks*, thereby making *vakıfs* the preferred outlet for various associational formations. The legal atmosphere was so favourable that between 1981 and 1996, 3021 new *vakıfs*, engaged in both religious charity and political activity, were founded (Zevkliler 1996:1440). Influenced by the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, *vakıfs* were also perceived and portrayed in a new light.

17 For example, in a series of articles published in the *Türkiye* newspaper in 1986, historian Bayram Kodaman argued that for the last 150 years the attention of the Turkish elite had been diverted by issues of “Western civilization, democracy, liberalism, socialism and communism” and claimed that this diversion damaged authentic Turkish culture. He continued:

Even Atatürk, who destroyed everything left by the Ottomans, decided to keep *vakıfs* around. But our elite often forget this historical fact. What is the reason behind this silence? This is because a strong *vakıf* institution feeds the poor. Some of our intellectuals, however, prefer if there are a lot of hungry people, because they see hungry people as an instrument for their revolutions.⁶

- 18 This account represents the historical shift concerning perceptions of how Ottoman heritage should influence Turkey's present. The author criticizes the Turkish intelligentsia for not being in tune with the "real" culture of the Turkish nation, and suggests that the *vakıf* institution is better suited to address the needs of the Turkish people, especially the poor, instead of the empty promises of leftist and Kemalist revolutions. During the same period, a number of scholarly publications began to examine the possible resuscitation of Ottoman *vakıf* heritage for governing Turkish welfare policy (Kozak 1985; Kazıcı 1985). These new intellectuals claimed that reviving the *vakıf* institution was the only way to assist the Turkish poor. Furthermore, the Social Solidarity and Mutual Assistance Fund (commonly referred to as the FAKFUKFON) was created in 1986 to provide social services to those who had been disenfranchised by the onset of economic liberalization. With this social fund, the Turkish state created 750 new *vakıfs* and tasked them with identifying and assisting poor people in local neighbourhoods. For example, a brochure published by the governing Motherland party brochure explained why *vakıfs* should deliver social services:

Vakıfs are the best way to help needy people without suffocating them in bureaucratic details. This is revealed by the fact that *vakıfs* have been accepted as the most established and permanent institution by the Turkish-Islamic civilization existing in Anatolia for the last thousand years.⁷

- 19 Such remarks capture the beginnings of a new understanding about *vakıfs*. In contrast to Kemalist articulations which sought to portray *vakıfs* as part of a pre-Islamic Turkish heritage, the Ottomanist articulations that emerged in the post-1980 period sought to underscore the religious aspects of the *vakıf* institution. Although, neo-Ottomanist depictions of *vakıf* heritage emerged during the 1980s, the equivalence of *vakıfs* with civil society organizations did not occur until later.
- 20 Such a correspondence became intelligible as a result of various political processes that occurred in the post-1990 era. First, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the emergence of a variety of political groups and social movements that questioned the premise of Kemalist secular nationalism and voiced their demands for cultural and political recognition. The Islamist movement, the secularist backlash, Kurdish separatism, Alevi revival, and the women's movement all ignited an "identity crisis" concerning the parameters of the Kemalist notion of Turkish cultural heritage (Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997). The emphasis on a homogenous ethnic identity as well as the confluence of modernization with Westernization and secularization came under attack. As a result, many politically motivated *derneks* and *vakıfs* were formed in order to criticize Turkey's state-centric political structure (Keyman and İçduygu 2003: 223).
- 21 Thus, the concept of "civil society" entered into the Turkish political lexicon amidst what appeared to be a moment of associational revolution marked by the "autonomization of civil societal elements from the grip of the centre" (Göle 1994: 213). During the mid-1990s, a series of conferences were organized by both state and non-state organizations with the purpose of discussing the problems and prospects of civil society in Turkey. These conferences were largely organized in response to the 1995 democratization package, which, among other things, promised to create a more liberal environment for associational activity (Kadıoğlu 2005:30). These spaces of intellectual exchange provided a platform for raising new questions, such as which organizations could be regarded as civil society organizations; the nature of the proper relationship between civil society organizations and the state and the conditions under which CSOs could best contribute to democratization. For example, one of the pressing concerns was how to translate the concept of civil society. This issue was discussed in a conference which brought together representatives from various *derneks* and *vakıfs* as:

All international organizations, including the United Nations, see voluntary organizations as institutions created by people who want to play a role in society outside of political power and state authority. This desire to voluntarily do something, without any pressure or force, is why

derneks and *vakıfs* are considered as “voluntary organizations.” To call these “non-governmental organizations,” however, gives these organizations an anti-systemic meaning, thereby creating a difficulty in our language and customs. As a result of this confusion, universities, municipalities, and business organizations have even begun to claim that they should also be categorized as non-governmental organizations.⁸

22 This excerpt, like many of the other discussions that had taken place during the mid-1990s, encapsulates a central problem of the time. During this era, intellectuals, politicians, civil society practitioners, and activists were trying to create local knowledge about civil society by reflecting on Western political writings on the subject, and discussing its applicability to the Turkish context. As one scholar and Member of Parliament put it: “Turkish intellectuals are in search of civil society... separately and all together they are trying to find civil society and are expecting something from it” (Karataş 1997: 9). This “search” for civil society meant that local organizational forms, such as *derneks* and *vakıfs* came to be seen in a new light.

23 For example, in 1995, organizers of a conference on civil society invited Yakup Yıldırım, a branch manager from the VGM to give information on the status of *vakıfs*. After he concluded his speech, one of the members of the audience confronted him with a question:

I am a bit hesitant to accept that *vakıfs* are voluntary organizations. *Vakıfs* had emerged as philanthropic institutions and lack a scientific, modern institutional structure. Especially in the Ottoman era, they arouse out of a religious pity towards the needy, ... in the last years, when I see that many *vakıfs* are created within state institutions, and that others are created for religious reasons, I hesitate to even call them civil society organizations. What do you think?⁹

24 In response to this query, he said: “many *vakıfs* today are created by people outside the state” and that these *vakıfs* have a variety of social, political and educational purposes, and for this reason, he further continued, that “we need to keep the social solidarity and mutual assistance *vakıfs* outside of the voluntary sector because they were created by law and are tied to the state.”¹⁰ This incident demonstrates the emergence of a new perception in which *vakıfs* were expected to have a certain kind of autonomy even if they were to be considered part of the voluntary sector. Imagining *vakıfs* in such a manner, however, posed a problem because neither autonomy nor civic engagement had ever been the distinguishing trait of the institution. Yet, the new rearticulation of Ottoman heritage enabled the representation of *vakıfs* as civil society organizations with democratic potential. For example, cabinet minister, Ahmet Cemil Tunç (who later became a key political figure in the JDP) explained in the introduction to the 1997 *Vakıf Journal* that:

Of course a society which is used to voluntary participation and tolerance as a result of the influence of *vakıfs* would have a political model system based upon a multiplicity of voices, plurality and participation. For this reason, a culture in which the *vakıf* institution is developed is also one where democratic apprehensions are stronger (Tunç 1997).

25 This was one of the first times in the history of Turkey that *vakıfs* were discussed as civil society organizations that were potentially able to contribute to democratization. However, not everyone shared the celebration of *vakıfs* as CSOs with democratic potential, indeed such a depiction of Ottoman civil society was a highly contested issue.

26 During the mid-1990s, many civic, associational and charitable organizations emerged as part of the Islamist movement. These organizations sought to confront, criticize, and challenge the Turkish state as well as other pro-establishment political circles. Since associational activity took shape in reaction to specific state policies, many of these organizations combined a moralistic stance and the overall endeavour to Islamizing Turkish society with an anti-state, anti-establishment rhetoric (Kadioğlu 2005). Some of these organizations focused on charitable activities whereas others were engaged in raising awareness, for example, of a woman’s right to wear a headscarf in the public sphere. Although many of these organizations had indirect political ties with the Islamist Welfare party, they still imagined themselves to be outside of “political society.” More importantly, Islamists used this image of an Islamic “civil society” against the authoritarian Kemalist state to elicit support (Navaro-Yashin 1998). As a result, many of these *vakıfs* and *derneks* came to be seen as contributing to the rise of political Islam and became a key site of contestation between the secularists and the Islamists.

During this period, secularists also formed voluntary associations that sought to revitalize the Republican heritage of civil society. Although pro-establishment actors sometimes used the legal-institutional structure of *vakıfs*, they rejected the idea that Ottoman-Islamic heritage could contribute to democratization. Instead, they claimed that secularist “civil society” organizations were the true representatives of the Turkish people (Özyürek 2006).

27 Therefore, the 1990s were marked by three political tensions surrounding *vakıfs*. Firstly, many secularists perceived *vakıfs* as a sign of the Islamization of society. These actors feared that *vakıfs* were secretly working to turn Turkey into an Islamic theocracy (Zevkliler 1996: 1443). Secondly, there was increasing debate concerned with whether or not religious associations and communities, which were usually tied to a *vakıf* could be considered a part of “civil society.” Secularists argued against such a categorization, whereas Islamists began to endorse such terminology. Thirdly, secularists associated *vakıfs* with clientelist networks of patronage and vote buying. Consequently, *vakıfs* were signalled out as one of the agents of Islamization in Turkey during the 28 February process in 1997, in which the Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan was forced to resign and his coalition government removed from power. During this period, the military obtained a significant amount of support from secularist Kemalist civil society organizations such as the Atatürkist Thought Association, The Association to Support Contemporary Life, Contemporary Education Foundation, as well as a number of others. In contrast, many conservative-Islamist *vakıfs* and associations were faced with political suppression. In order to distance itself from Islamist “civil society,” the VGM even published a special brochure in 1998 explaining that the Ministry did not have control over the day-to-day political and charitable activities of *vakıfs*.¹¹

28 Consequently, many Islamist actors, politicians and intellectuals understood the 28 February Process to be yet another occurrence of the military-state establishment crashing down on Turkish “civil society.” In contrast to the heritage actors of the mid-1980s, who had emphasized the philanthropic and charitable functions of *vakıfs*, in the immediate post-1997 period, the Ottoman heritage of civil society began to be imagined as a politically active force capable of confronting, criticizing, and challenging state power. Although some politicians and intellectuals were careful not to uncritically apply the term civil society to the Ottoman Empire, many understood contemporary Islamist *derneks* and *vakıfs* to be the latest phase in the long struggle against the secularist state (Çaha and Karaman 2004; Karaman and Aras 2000).

29 For example, Abdullah Gül (1997: 14), who would later become the president of Turkey between 2007 and 2014, discussed the impact of the 1997 postmodern coup as yet another instance in which the elite had oppressed the Turkish people and all of their “civil activities.” Further, such a representation of the 28 February process as a confrontation between a secular state and an Islamic civil society was often discussed by conservative intellectuals with reference to the richness of civil society in the Ottoman Empire. Omer Çaha suggested that the Turkish “intellectual bureaucratic elite” had destroyed the Ottoman fabric of civil society (1997: 36). Sabahattin Zaim argued that: “Voluntary formations were extremely developed in the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic societies” (1997: 297). In a similar vein, Ali Bulaç posited that Turkish civil society had been historically weakened as a result of the abandonment of Islamic and Ottoman principles in social life, and declared that these civil movements would continue to face the authoritarian state with their political and cultural demands in the future (1997: 247-250).

30 Such accounts of the 28 February process sought to present civil society as a sphere of collective action and a force for democratization. This Islamist claim (which, it must be noted, did not necessarily correspond to on-the-ground political realities) expected *derneks* and *vakıfs* to criticize, challenge, and confront state power. However, such a politically active notion of civil society was replaced by a depoliticized formulation after the JDP came to power in 2002. Henceforth, it was argued that the Ottoman heritage of civil society was one that relied on a collaborative state-civil society relationship.

IV. From Confrontation to Collaboration: Reconstructing the Ottoman Heritage of Civil Society

- 31 The JDP reproduced Ottoman heritage in such a fashion for a number of reasons. After the 1997 post-modern coup, a moderate-reformist wing led by the JDP adopted a less confrontational stance vis-à-vis the Turkish military and the secular state establishment (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Çınar 2003). As a result of this moderation, the JDP embraced a pro-globalization and pro-European outlook. After its election in 2002, the party blended Islamic social values with neoliberal economic principles, thereby embracing a market-oriented political ideology (Tuğal 2009). One of the domains where the blending of neoliberalism and Islamism occurred was the domain of welfare policy. In contrast to the previously existing developmentalist welfare regime, the JDP diminished the scope of social benefits for public workers, and instead developed a new welfare regime focused on providing social assistance to the Turkish poor (Buğra 2008; Özbek 2006). In addition, the JDP had to sustain its legitimacy while remaining in power. To achieve this, the party had to expand its electoral base to various sectors in Turkish society. Among other things, such a broadened political platform required an appeal to, an engagement with –and at times the co-option of– different segments of the Islamist movement. The political activism of Islamic civil society organizations (some of which had closer political ties to Islamist political networks other than the JDP) were repurposed and rechanneled into the area of social service provision (Eder 2010; Morvaridi 2013). Transformation of Islamism altered perceptions of Ottoman heritage and state-civil society relations. In contrast to the depiction of the Ottoman heritage of civil society as a deeply political and therefore an anti-statist, anti-establishment force, after the 2000s, the same heritage was (re)articulated by Islamists in a state-supportive and depoliticized fashion.
- 32 Initially, this novel understanding of Ottoman civil society was produced in a series of conferences organized in 2003 by state institutions such as the VGM, the Social Solidarity and Mutual Assistance General Ministry and pro-government Islamic CSOs such as the Light House [*Deniz Feneri*] organization. These conferences included the *Vakıf* Civilization Symposium (Ankara, 12–13 May 2003), the International *Vakıf* Symposium Conference (Ankara, 15–17 December 2003), and the Poverty Symposium (Istanbul, 31 May–1 June 2003), which created a platform for Islamic-conservative scholars, politicians, and activists to discuss, and in the process to reimagine, an Ottoman heritage of poverty alleviation, social justice, and state-civil society relations. In 2006, the Turkish government declared it to be the national *Vakıf* Civilization Year and yet another series of conferences were organized. The papers and speeches delivered at these conferences sought to revive the Ottoman tradition of civil society, and as such operated as a key mechanism for the production, negotiation, and dissemination of ideas about cultural heritage. For example, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Mehmet Ali Şahin explained during the 2003 *Vakıf* Symposium: “...we are not going to just talk about *vakıfs*...but we are also going to discuss the possible reconfiguration of these institutions.”¹² During the “Reconstruction of *vakıfs*” symposium panel, Mehmet Akif Aydın, a law professor, stated: “The Turkish state and bureaucracy has always approached civil institutions such as the *vakıf* with suspicion. Throughout our history, legislation introduced about *vakıfs* and *derneks* have been shaped by the state’s insecurity about associational activity, but it is time for us to return to the principles of the Ottoman past.”¹³ Later, during the *Vakıf* Civilization Year symposium of 2006, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, after discussing why the “revitalization of the *vakıf*” had been a key focus of the JDP government, said: “All we wanted was to make sure that our Ottoman *vakıf* heritage will continue to illuminate Turkey’s future with compassion.”¹⁴
- 33 The discourse of reviving the Ottoman heritage of *vakıfs* enabled the JDP to introduce two key legal-institutional changes concerning the political and philanthropic activities of *derneks* and *vakıfs*. First, the JDP’s initial years in office were shaped by Turkey’s bid to become a member of the European Union and to change policies in support of such membership. In the early 2000s, various political reform packages were adopted in order to comply with EU regulations and conditions (Müftüler Baç 2005). Freedom of expression and associational life

were identified —amongst others— as vital areas in need of reform and, as a result, a series of constitutional changes and legal-administrative reforms were introduced in order to liberalize *dernek* activity. In a conference organized to discuss the future of *derneks* and *vakıfs*, Murat Sungur, the Turkish ministry of EU affairs explained the importance of embarking on a new era in state-civil society relationships with the following words:

A country's level of development is currently judged by modern criteria such as its respect for human rights, level of participatory democracy and extent of good governance. A state's capacity and willingness to be in dialogue with civil society is key to the realization of these principles. (Uzunoglu 2005:17)

34 The JDP introduced a series of legal reforms concerning *vakıfs* and *derneks* during this critical juncture in order to harmonize Turkish civil society with its European counterparts. These reforms include the 2004 Law of Associations and the 2008 Law of *Vakıfs* which aimed to allow a greater degree of independence to Turkish CSOs. In addition to these ongoing attempts at reconfiguring civil society, the JDP also initiated a comprehensive reform of the Turkish welfare regime, making social assistance distribution a key mechanism. Social solidarity and assistance *derneks* and *vakıfs* were tasked with delivering social services to the poor. A concerted effort to streamline the financial and administrative procedures and social assistance distribution mechanisms of these organizations emerged. The number of state-related social solidarity and assistance *vakıfs* increased to 975 and their scope of activity was expanded.¹⁵ In addition, the JDP encouraged members of the Islamist network to legalize their charitable activities in the form of private social solidarity and assistance *derneks*. These private *derneks* were expected to fulfil similar welfare responsibilities as state *vakıfs* despite the fact that they were treated as autonomous CSOs.

35 In short, both EU-related and welfare-related reforms contributed to the blurring of the distinction between *vakıfs* and *derneks*, thereby contributing to their “NGOization” (Alvarez 1999; Kamat 2004; Choudry and Kapoor 2013). More importantly, the reconfiguration of the political and philanthropic terrain of *vakıfs* and *derneks* were supported, managed and controlled by JDP's heritage discourse of Ottoman civil society. In this new mode of heritage production, the Ottoman Empire was increasingly portrayed as one in which civil society organizations, namely *vakıfs*, collaborated with the state.

36 From this perspective, it was argued that *vakıfs* formed a part of the Ottoman state while at the same time remaining distinct from it. These contradictory ideas concerning the ideal state-civil society relationship were expressed in various writings about the topic and were also articulated by interviewees during my fieldwork. Some actors emphasized the inherent autonomy of *vakıfs* vis-à-vis the state. For example, in his opening speech for the 2006 *Vakıf* Week Celebrations, Yusuf Bayezit declared that: “There is locality in the situation of *vakıfs*. This is a point that is mostly forgotten. *Vakıf* is a form of local administration. But it is an enterprise unrelated with the state or public governance.”¹⁶ Other actors that I met during my fieldwork were ambiguous about the question of autonomy. For example, Murat, the manager of a branch of the Is Anybody There? Social Solidarity and Assistance *dernek* [*Kimse Yok Mu Dayanışma ve Yardımlaşma derneği*] explained:

Some people criticize us; they think we are only giving out hand-outs. But when you look at the developed countries of the North, what does the state do? It even leaves milk at its citizens' doorsteps. Like any welfare state should do. This is what we are doing here, when we distribute social assistance, we are fulfilling the duties of a welfare state.

37 This manager, like many others, believed that the distribution of social assistance by (government-friendly) civil society organizations was a manifestation of the “welfare state,” or an example of the state fulfilling its welfare responsibilities. Other actors also expressed ambiguity concerning the distinction between state and civil society as well. One female university student who volunteered at the main office of the Light House *dernek* explained that she was here to assist the state, but added: “It would of course be better if the state could reach all the poor, but since it cannot, we are here to serve the state and the poor.” In these and similar accounts, “civil society” was argued to be in the service of the state. Although

civil society organizations were financially and administratively independent, they were still expected to cooperate with the state.

38 Interestingly, even some of the state social solidarity and assistance *vakıfs* imagined themselves to be part of civil society. Cetin, an enthusiastic manager of a state *vakıf* in Ankara, for example, claimed that: “We might be public employees, yes, our salary is paid by the state, but other than that, what we do here is all the things that a civil society organization does. That’s why what I tell my workers here is that they need to think of themselves as workers of a civil society organization even if we appear to be serving the state.” Although many of the workers at this state *vakıf* did not share Çetin’s enthusiasm, still some of them agreed that what they did (distributing social assistance) was largely performing the function of a civil society organization.

39 In sum, under the JDP’s discourse of Ottoman heritage, civil society came to be seen as a distinct sector which supports the state. Such a heritage discourse claimed that state-civil society relations should be based on a model of partnership to deliver social services. Through a telling of the story of the Ottoman past in a selective way, the JDP was able to orient the charitable and political dynamism of Islamic civil society towards embracing a collaborative relationship with the state.

Conclusion

40 While culturalist and institutionalist approaches towards civil society may be able to partially explain the depoliticization of civil society in Turkey, this article has shown that the mobilization and rearticulation of heritage is crucial for understanding this particular outcome. Focusing on heritage-as-essence does not help us to recognize the ways in which shifting articulations of Ottoman heritage have shaped approaches to contemporary issues, such as civil society. Moreover, understanding Ottoman heritage as a tangible fixed essence results in an overemphasis on certain political traditions and ideas at the expense of others.

41 The question here is not whether a certain Ottoman “civil society” thus portrayed can be regarded as a truthful representation of the past. There definitely existed a variety of religious, secular, and political communities, institutions, groups and establishments that comprised the heart of social life in the Ottoman Empire. At different historical junctures, specific segments of Ottoman “civil society” likely developed a variety of relationships with the imperial authorities ranging from conflict to accommodation, and from opposition to adjustment. But the complexity of interactions between Ottoman society and polity cannot be understood from the perspective of a modern dichotomy such as state versus civil society. Further, to mark these complex connections and relationships as mere examples of “collaboration” is not only a simplistic but also a reductionist view of history. Yet, JDP’s articulation about Ottoman associational heritage downplayed this complexity by manufacturing a selective version of the imperial past, which led to the partial depoliticization of Turkish civil society.

42 In this respect, the JDP’s model of heritage does not diverge from other manifestations of heritage politics which narrate the past according to the political needs of the present. As Bendix argues, “segments of culture acquire cultural heritage status once particular value is assigned to them.” (Bendix 2009: 258) In the case of Turkey, it was the Islamists who argued that Ottoman “civil society” was a constitutive element of national cultural heritage. During the 1990s, such a mode of heritagisation portrayed Islamic civil society as the true representative of the Turkish people, and the enthusiastic willingness of the movement to defend the rights and interests of the populace allowed this political movement to claim legitimacy vis-à-vis the secularist-military establishment. However, once the JDP assumed office, the Ottoman heritage of state-civil society relations was increasingly portrayed as one of collaboration and partnership. Such a shift in the representation of Ottoman heritage, in turn, reshaped the terrain of politically permissible activity for CSOs in Turkey.

43 Various Islamic, secular and leftist CSOs have responded differently to these changes. On the one hand, ongoing processes of political liberalization which has opened up the field for associational and charitable activity and allowed new kinds of political and humanitarian organizations (such as MAZLUMDER and İHH¹⁷) to gain domestic and transnational

influence. On the other hand, many CSOs have also suffered from emergent heritage ideas which demand, if not dictate, a collaborative, compliant and perhaps even a complicit model of civil society. This new mode of heritagisation has been especially restrictive for CSOs who seek to represent the interests of marginalized, oppressed and discriminated groups such as women, Alevi's, LGBT groups and the Kurds.

44 One of the areas where the restrictive vision of JDP's Ottoman heritage discourse can be observed is the 2013 *Gezi* Park events during which a diverse group of activists and ordinary people occupied a small park in Istanbul in order to protest the government's plan to demolish the park and replace it with a replica of an Ottoman-era barracks building combined a shopping mall and apartment complex.¹⁸ The Turkish state's oppression of this social movement illustrates that Ottoman heritage discourse is currently deployed in an anti-democratic, oppressive and polarizing manner perhaps much to the dismay of some Islamist groups. This situation may not only be the result of the aberrant use of state power by the JDP, but instead the consolidation of a particular view of state-civil society relations informed by the Ottoman heritage discourse. Whether a new articulation of Ottoman heritage—one that is tolerant of opposition and conducive to a democratic civil society— will flourish, remains to be seen.

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Notes

- 1 Information about and names of individuals have been changed and some interviews and information have been combined in order to ensure anonymity of the people I met during my fieldwork.
- 2 For example see Diamond *et al.* 2003; Elbadawi and Makdisi 2011.
- 3 For an exception, see Işık 2014.
- 4 Scholars disagree about the primary role of *wakıfs* in the Ottoman Empire. Since the main subject of this essay is the reheritagisation of these institutions by the Turkish Islamist movement, this debate largely falls outside of its scope. For a range of views on the question of *wakıfs* in the Ottoman Empire as well as other Muslim contexts, see: Çızakca 2000; Deguilhem 1995; Doumani 1998; Kozłowski 1995; Kuran 2001; Rafeq 2006; Singer 2008; van Leeuwen 1999 among others.
- 5 “Yeni Vakıf Sayıları,” <http://www.vgm.gov.tr/db/dosyalar/webicerik194.pdf> (accessed 6 July 2014).
- 6 Bayram Kodaman, “Yıkıcıların Sinsi Planları,” 6 May 1986, *Türkiye*.
- 7 *Anavatan İktidarının Yüzakı İcraatlarından Biri: Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışmayı Teşvik Fonu: Hayırlı Fon*, (Ankara, Anavatan Partisi Yayınları, 1987), pp.4.
- 8 *Turkish NGOs Directory* (1995), Ankara, Türkiye Çevre Vakfı Yayını, p.5.
- 9 Gönüllü Kuruluşlar Konferansı (1995), Ankara, Türkiye Çevre Vakfı Yayını, p. 68.
- 10 *Ibid*, p.68.
- 11 *Türk Medeni Kanunu Hükümlerine Göre Kurulan Vakıflar Hakkında Tebliğ*, (1998), Ankara: Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, p.4.
- 12 Şahin, Mehmet Ali (2004) “Devlet Bakanı ve Başbakan Yardımcısı Mehmet Ali Şahin’in Konuşması,” *Cumhuriyetin Sekseninci Yılında Uluslararası Vakıf Sempozyumu*, 15-17 Aralık 2003, Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, Ankara, p.15.
- 13 *Cumhuriyetin Sekseninci Yılında Uluslararası Vakıf Sempozyumu*, p. 241.
- 14 *2006 Vakıf Medeniyeti Yılı ve Vakıflar Haftası Etkinlikleri Kitabı*, (2007) Ankara, Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, p. 21.
- 15 “Vakıfların Türlerine Göre Dağılımı,” Available at: <http://www.vgm.gov.tr/db/dosyalar/webicerik195.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2014).
- 16 *2006 Vakıf Medeniyeti Yılı ve Vakıflar Haftası Etkinlikleri Kitabı*, p. 47.
- 17 Respectively the Association for Human Rights and Solidarity with the Oppressed [*İnsan Hakları ve Mazlunlar İçin Dayanışma Derneği*] and The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief [*İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*].
- 18 For an analysis of the *Gezi Park* protests, see Arat 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2013; Özkırımlı 2014.

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About the author

Gizem Zencirci

Assistant Professor of Political Science
Providence College

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of JDP's (Justice and Development Party) neo-Ottomanist heritage politics upon state-civil society relations in Turkey. Instead of treating Ottoman heritage as a fixed essence, this essay illustrates how shifting interpretations of the Ottoman past serve to construct alternative understandings of civil society. Although during the 1990s the Islamist movement largely depicted Ottoman "civil society" as a democratic force, I argue that this earlier understanding has been abandoned in favour of a depoliticized notion of state-civil society relations after JDP come to power in 2002. The ongoing selective portrayal of Ottoman heritage represents religious endowments [*vakıflar*] as state-supportive civil society organizations. Consequently, many contemporary civil society organizations are expected to conform to these newly conceived ideas about Ottoman heritage. Most importantly, this new mode of heritage production emphasizes a collaborative model of state-civil society relations instead of one that tolerates political opposition.

Index terms

Index by keywords : Turkey, Islamism, Heritage, Civil Society, Neo-Ottomanism