



Is Turkey's Government Starting a Muslim Reformation?

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Accounts from Turkey suggest that the government is attempting a bold re-interpretation of Islam.

Its unusually named ministry of religion, the "[Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Religious Charitable Foundation](#)," has undertaken a three-year "Hadith Project" systematically to review 162,000 *hadith* reports and winnow them down to some 10,000, with the goal of separating original Islam from the accretions of fourteen centuries.

The *hadith* reports contain information about the sayings and actions of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. They augment the Koran and have had a major role in shaping the *Shari'a* (Islamic law), thereby deeply influencing Muslim life. Despite their importance, Muslim reformers have devoted little scrutiny to them,

due to their vast size, unwieldy nature, and the challenge of discerning "sound" from "weak" *hadiths*.

One of the project's 85 theology professors, [Ismail Hakki Unal](#) of Ankara University, explains its goal: "The Koran is our basic guide. Anything that conflicts with that, we are trying to eliminate." The project website explained that its work is "an important step for carrying the universal message of the Prophet of Islam to the twenty-first century."

[Mehmet Görmez](#), a senior lecturer in hadith at Ankara University and the vice-president of religious affairs, adds that the purpose is a scholarly one, to understand the *hadith* better: "We will make a new compilation of the *hadith* and re-interpret them if necessary." More broadly, Görmez explains, "The pro-

ject takes its inspiration from the interpretations of the modernist vein of Islam. ... We want to bring out the positive side of Islam that promotes personal honor, human rights, justice, morality, women's rights, respect for the other."

This means, for example, reinterpreting *hadiths* that "present women as inferior beings," such as those that encourage female genital mutilation, honor killings, and the prohibition of women traveling without their husbands. One participant, [Hidayet Sevkathı Tuksal](#), goes so far as to declare some *hadiths* as bogus because they intend "to ensure male domination over women." However, despite the intense current debate in Turkey over the headscarf, the project avoids that particular issue. Another sensitive topic concerns the right of Muslims to convert out of their faith; the project permits such conversions.

Some Turks have great hopes for the Hadith Project, which aims to produce a multi-volume book in Turkish, Arabic, and Russian by year's end. [Taha Akyol](#), a political commentator, sees a revolution taking place. "In other countries you have reform of Islam pushed through by despotic or modernist regimes but in Turkey you are seeing the reform taking place in the middle classes. And that is real reform." Another commentator, [Mustafa Akyol](#), believes that the revised *hadiths* "will be a step to change mindsets."

[Fadi Hakura](#) of Chatham House goes further, calling the project "somewhat akin to the Christian Ref-

ormation." He applauds the project being sponsored by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. AKP involvement means that "this reform movement is not being implemented by a secular group, but by the ruling [party, which] is very religious and conservative. So this is an authentic internal process of change."

Other observers are more skeptical. Hashim Hashimi, a former MP, for example, states that "There are established views on Islam and how it should be practiced that have been in place for 1400 years. And they aren't going to change any time soon." Even the head of the ministry, [Ali Bardakoğlu](#), acknowledges that "we are not reforming Islam; we are reforming ourselves."

What to make of this initiative? Serious efforts to modernize Islam, which this appears to be, are most welcome. At the same time, one has to wonder about agendas when government intercedes in the subtle and even subversive domain of religious reform. Specifically, the AKP's Islamist nature arouses mistrust that the Hadith Project will limit itself to the relatively easy social issues and avoid the tougher political ones in order to fashion an ideologically more defensible Islam even while maintaining some of its more problematic aspects. Does the project's avoidance of the headscarf topic also imply its not taking up female legal rights, women marrying non-Muslim men, *riba* (interest on money), jihad, the rights of non-

Muslims, and the creation of an Islamic order?

By limiting its subject matter, the project might forward Islamism more than modernize Islam. True re-

form awaits true reformers – not Islamist functionaries but independent, modern individuals intent on aligning Islam with the best of modern mores.