

Civil society, Islam and democracy in Turkey: a study of three Islamic non-governmental organizations

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Abstract

The following article studies three Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey and evaluates them in terms of their contributions to the process of democratization in that country. There is not a necessarily positive correlation between civil society and democratization. As A. R. Norton said in the introduction of the book that he edited entitled *Civil Society in the Middle East*; "Societies do not take two tablets of civil society at bedtime and wake up the next morning undergoing democratization." Indeed, some elements of civil society seem to pull them towards authoritarian practices. In spite of the fact that civil society has come to be viewed by most political theorists as the sine qua non of democracy, especially in the aftermath of the 1989 collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, there are also those who warn against the abuse of this popular concept. The relationship of the concepts of civil society and democracy with Islam is even more complex. While some approaches bluntly declare the incompatibility of Islam with the other two phenomena, others caution against the overgeneralization of Islamic movements and attract attention to differences among them. Hence, while some Islamic organizations display closed, absolutist and authoritarian tendencies, others point to the possibility of a convergence among civil society, Islam and democracy. In the first part of the following text, some of the theoretical debates on the relationship between civil society, Islam, and democracy will be portrayed. In the second part, the agendas and views of the three Islamic NGOs in Turkey will be studied. The overall purpose of this article is to show how an analysis of the Islamic NGOs which display different characteristics can pave the way to a reassessment of the literature that focuses on the dynamics of civil society, Islam, and democracy.

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