# Introduction

In June 2011, an all-too-familiar confrontation took place between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the head of the oppositional Republican People's Party (CHP).[1] To his constituency in Istanbul, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu promised to restructure Imam-Hatip schools in ways that would qualify them solely as schools that trained the country's religious functionaries. Ten days later, in Isparta, Erdoğan retorted by assuring his constituency: "whether [Kılıçdaroğlu] wants or not, we opened, we are opening and will open Imam-Hatip schools as long as you support us." Erdoğan added, "My four children are graduates of Imam-Hatip schools, and I am proud of them."[2]

What are Imam-Hatip schools and why do they feature so prominently in political repartee? Imam-Hatip schools are Islamic schools that provide the most prominent exception to the rule of secular education in Turkey. Currently, there are more than 490 Imam-Hatip schools in the country, which nominally provide vocational education (*mesleki eğitim*) to more than 235,000 high school students between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.[3] These schools were established in 1924, shortly after the

[1] CHP is a center-left party founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 and AKP is a moderately Islamic party founded in 2001. On distinctions between CHP and AKP constituencies, see Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: 2010).

[2] "Başbakan Isparta'da," *Sabah*, June 2, 2011.

[3] For the latest statistics on national education, see http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/istatistik/meb_istatistikleri_orgun_egitim_2010_2011.pdf, last accessed September 2011. Imam-Hatip schools are just one of many vocational schools in the country. Others include the schools for health, commerce, and industry. For more information, see http://www.meb.gov.tr/Stats/apk2002ing/apage29_48.htm, last accessed November 2011.

establishment of the Republic, for the specific purpose of training prayer leaders (imams) and preachers (*hatip*s).[4] Like all Turkish schools, Imam-Hatip schools are organized and monitored by the Ministry of Education (MEB). The Ministry determines their educational policies, sets their curricula, and approves the content of their textbooks. Unlike any other Turkish school, however, Imam-Hatip schools teach from a curriculum that emphasizes religion within a broader arts and sciences curriculum.

In the past forty years, the function and status of the schools has shifted from the margins of the Turkish education system to a position of prestige, controversy, and influence. Although still classified as vocational schools (*meslek liseleri*), the schools have added more nonreligious classes to their curricula, enabling the schools' graduates to enter universities and faculties of every kind. At contemporary Imam-Hatip schools, religious classes (*meslek dersleri*) comprise 40 percent of students' in-class time while nonreligious classes (*kültür dersleri*) comprise 60 percent of students' in-class time. Today, only 15 percent of the schools' graduates become religious functionaries.[5] The majority of Imam-Hatip school graduates enter business, the practice of law, and politics and many of them fill middle- and high-level posts in national and local government.

The growing tendency of Imam-Hatip school graduates to pursue careers outside of the religious realm have put the schools at the nexus of debates over Islamism, secularism, and modernity in Turkey. The country's secular-leaning and religiously conservative communities possess clashing perspectives about the schools' role in politics and society.[6] Many secular-leaning communities, the majority of which support Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP, oppose the schools because they believe that the schools have moved away from their purpose of training religious functionaries to graduating like-minded individuals, who seek to undermine the founding principles of the republic. Kemal Gürüz, a vocal academic, asserts that the schools manipulate students with a "worldview that is based on faith rather than reason."[7] Many religiously conservative communities, the majority of which support Erdoğan's AKP, on the other hand, support the schools on the grounds

[4] For clear definitions of prayer leader (imam) and preacher (*hatip*), see Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Imam," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (The Netherlands: 2008); J. Pedersen, "Khatib," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* eds. P. Bearman et al. (The Netherlands: 2008).

[5] Ahmet Ünsür, *Kuruluşundan Günümüze İmam-Hatip Liseleri* (Istanbul: 2005); Hüdaverdi Adam, "The Profile of Imam-Hatip Schools in Contemporary Turkey," *Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi* 19 (2003–2004): 163–182.

[6] For definitions on secular-leaning or secularist, and religiously conservative or Islamist communities, see the Terminology section of this chapter. *Radikal*, July 22, 2009.

[7] http://europe.einaudi.cornell.edu/about/pdf/Guruz.pdf, last accessed September 2011.

that they offer a venue where students can learn and practice their religion while also studying nonreligious subjects. Hayrettin Karaman, one of Turkey's most influential Muslim intellectuals, claims that Imam-Hatip schools should become the model for all high schools in Turkey because they educate "the type of person [who] esteems his religious values and wants to propagate them to the world as formulas for salvation."[8]

The prominence of Imam-Hatip school graduates within the rank-and-file of the ruling AKP has intensified the polarization among Turkey's secular-leaning and religiously conservative communities. Although the population of the schools constitute a mere 5 percent of the national student body, a good number of deputies in parliament are Imam-Hatip school graduates.[9] Prime Minister Erdoğan is an outspoken and loyal Imam-Hatip school graduate, who has made bold statements and undertaken initiatives that support the schools and their graduates.[10] Significantly, in recent years, he and his party members have appointed a wave of Imam-Hatip school graduates to high positions in the ministries of education, justice, and the interior.

The debates that the large representation of Imam-Hatip graduates in influential governmental posts has generated in Turkish society are only one aspect of a larger struggle concerning the future direction of Turkey and the broader Middle East. Since the 1970s, Turkey has witnessed the emergence of political parties and social networks that have claimed to represent the religiously conservative masses and pressured for reform of the country's firmly secular principles and traditions. Despite the ill fortunes that have fallen on many of these parties and networks, these pressures, commonly understood as being part of the broader Islamic movement (*İslami hareket*), have sustained and gained their momentum.[11] When the Welfare Party (RP) shut down, Jenny White documented how party members scoffed and told her that they were not worried because "their social and political networks would not be affected" by the closure.[12] One businessman told her, "a few politicians will lose their jobs. It has no effect on us. We're a social movement, not a party."[13]

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[8] Hayrettin Karaman, *Laik Düzende Dini Yaşamak* (Istanbul: 2002), vol. 2, 95.

[9] Soner Çağaptay, "Turkey: In Love with Arab Islamists," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 24, 2009. The deputies' biographies can be found at: http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/ milletvekillerimiz_sd.liste, last accessed March 2012.

[10] Erdoğan is the first Imam-Hatip school graduate to serve as the mayor of Istanbul and the Prime Minister of Turkey.

[11] For definition, see the Terminology section of this chapter.

[12] Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: 2002), 5.

[13] Ibid.

Since 2002, Turkey has been governed by the AKP, which has roots in political Islam and comes from a long line of Islamist political parties.[14] In June 2011, the AKP secured its third term in government, causing some to assert that Prime Minister Erdoğan has "more power than any Turkish leader since Kemal Atatürk."[15] This book argues that Imam-Hatip schools and their communities constitute one of the key institutions from which Turkey's Islamic movement in general, and the ruling AKP in particular, draw their strength and resilience.

Under Prime Minister Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey has undergone significant changes. The founding members of the AKP call themselves "conservative democrats."[16] They avow that they no longer subscribe to an Islamist ideology and have no desire to establish an Islamic state.[17] However, many outside observers as well as significant numbers of Turkey's secular-leaning communities suspect the party's domestic and international agendas. Focusing on the party members' Islamic schooling and religious sensibilities, they allege that the AKP seeks to "Islamize" Turkish politics and society and erode secularism in the country. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, the AKP governments have successively widened the parameters for religious expression, reshaping local ordinances and state policies.

In the wake of the Middle East's 2011 Arab Spring, Turkey's political future will play a vital role. For some, Turkey's ability to balance Islam and secularism has been regarded as a model for the way in which Muslims can govern secular democracies.[18] As Abdullahi An-Na'im stresses,

If Turkey is able to show that a secular regime can still find a place for religious discourse and human rights for all, then it will go a long way towards rehabilitating the word "secular" among Muslims everywhere. By the same token, if Turkey is able to show that it can allow an Islamic political voice to be heard

[14] For further discussion, see Chapter 1.
[15] Stephen Kinzer, "A Triumphant Turkey?," *New York Review of Books* 58.13 (2011): 37.
[16] The literature on the identity of the AKP is extensive; see Ümit Cizre, ed., *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey* (London: 2008); Hakan Yavuz, ed., *The Emergence of a New Turkey* (Utah: 2006).
[17] It is worth noting that one major reason political parties do not publicly claim to be Islamist is simply because they could otherwise be banned by the constitutional court on the grounds of anti-secularist activities.
[18] For examples, see http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=177456, last accessed September 2011; http://www.npr.org/2011/04/14/135407687/turkish-democracy-a-model-for-other-countries, last accessed August 2011; and http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/201191684356995273.html, last accessed September 2011.

while maintaining a secular government and constitutional rights for all, it will reassure secularists throughout the world that Islam has a place in the political discourse.[19]

For others, however, Turkey must realign its politics to be more in tune with Islamic norms and traditions. Historically, Turkey has been a strong ally of the United States and Israel. Under the leadership of Erdoğan, these alliances have transformed. In 2003, Turkey denied U.S. troops permission to transit or stage operations from its territory for the war in Iraq.[20] In 2011, Turkey expelled Israel's ambassador and suspended all military agreements because of Israel's refusal to apologize for the raid of a Gaza-bound flotilla, the Mavi Marmara.[21] Prime Minister Erdoğan's harsh line against Israel and his support of a Palestinian state, has won the appreciation of many Arabs.[22] In a recent visit to Turkey, the Tunisian Islamist leader Rached Ghannouchi hailed Turkey as a model for Tunisians and identified the AKP as "a very successful experience of modern Muslim government."[23]

It is important to recognize that although the AKP can be regarded as a Muslim government, it controls power within a secular state. Since the late 1990s, scholars have been examining the practices of secular states and challenging some of the established categories used to understand and assess secularism.[24] There has been a widespread definition that secularism is the separation of religion from the policy and practices of the state. Recent scholarship, however, finds this definition too narrow and argues that secularism seeks "not so much to banish religion from

[19] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge: 2008), 222.

[20] http://csis.org/files/publication/110804_iran_chapter_8_turkey_casp.pdf, last accessed September 2011.

[21] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14762475, last accessed September 2011.

[22] Regardless, the Prime Minister's calls for Egypt to adopt a secular constitution irked many Islamists in the region. http://www.juancole.com/2011/09/muslim-brotherhood-rebukes-erdogan-for-advocacy-of-secularism.html, last accessed September 2011.

[23] http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=tunisias-opposition-leader-to-visit-turkey-report-2011-02-25, last accessed September 2011. Notably, Ghannouchi himself is a moderate Islamist leader.

[24] For further discussion, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: 2007); Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: 2010); Hussein Ali Agrama, "Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or Religious State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52.3 (2010): 495–523; Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Summer 2009): 836–862.

the public domain, but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make."[25]

This broader definition better captures the ways in which religion and state interact in Turkey. While the Turkish state pursues restrictive policies toward Islam, it controls and regulates the religious affairs of the country through an institutional network. With respect to Imam-Hatip schools, the state grants permission for the operation of the schools, appoints their teachers, and designs their curricula. After graduation, however, it expects the graduates to become religious functionaries working for the state's Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB), and to transmit knowledge sanctioned by the state.[26] Ahmet Kuru pins the Turkish state's "inconsistent, if not contradictory" policies toward religion on the ideological struggles that persist among the supporters of "assertive" and "passive" secularism. According to Kuru, assertive secularists regard Islam "as an inherently political religion and an impediment to the modernization of Turkish society."[27] Thus, they try to confine religion to individual conscience and exclude it from the public sphere. Passive secularists, by contrast, remain neutral toward all religions and thoughts and "maintain peace among diverse beliefs, schools of thought, and perspectives."[28]

In making these arguments, Kuru notes that the notion of assertive secularism had been dominant in organizing political and social life in Turkey. Since 2002, however, the Turkish state and society has been moving markedly closer to a passive notion of secularism. According to Stephen Kinzer, this transformation results from "a new ethos, more open to religious influence, [which] has changed the terms of politics and public life."[29] Imam-Hatip schools and their communities have been integral in creating this new ethos and in shaping Turkish politics and society. Although this ethos does not pose an immediate threat to the secularity of the state, it contributes to the Islamization (*islamlaşma*) of the sociocultural landscape, manifested by increased displays of religious sociability, such as changes in style of dress and speech and a proliferation of gender-segregated beaches, mosques, and Qur'an courses.[30]

[25] Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 326.
[26] See further discussion of the DİB in Chapter 1.
[27] Ahmet Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion* (Cambridge: 2009), 11, 176.
[28] Ibid., 179.
[29] Stephen Kinzer, "A Triumphant Turkey?," *New York Review of Books* 58.13 (2011): 37.
[30] For further discussion, see Chapter 5.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the study of Turkey's Islamic movement and its relationship to political power and partisan politics. These studies generally fall into three broad and often overlapping categories.[31] As exemplified by the works of Hakan Yavuz and Jenny White, one category focuses on the personalities, mechanisms, sociology, and history of Islamist or religiously oriented political parties, such as the RP and the AKP.[32] Another category, exemplified by the works of Nilüfer Göle and Yael Navaro-Yashin, discusses Islamic veiling and deal with issues of identity and the role of women in the Islamic movement.[33] A third category, illustrated by the works of Şerif Mardin and Berna Turam, examines Islamic brotherhoods, such as the *Nakşibendi*s, and religious communities, such as the Gülen community.[34] In these studies, the influential role that the schools and their communities have played in Turkey's political and social transformation is precursory or often overlooked.

By putting Imam-Hatip schools at center stage, this book showcases the multi-faceted way in which Islamic knowledge, politics, and social networks interact. It offers new information about and insights into the workings of the schools, the attitudes and behaviors of their students, and the political and civic activities of their graduates. It probes into the nature of instruction at the schools and offers new perspectives on how an Imam-Hatip school education may shape the political socialization of Imam-Hatip school students. It introduces informal, but highly influential modes of education, communication, and networking that appear in and around the Imam-Hatip schools. In so doing, this book provides insights into the varieties of Islamic schools and their relationship to secular states, and deepens understanding of the multiplicity of actors involved in Islamic movements and their employment of educational institutions to promote social and political reform.

[31] For extensive literature review, see Jeremy Walton, *Horizons and Histories of Liberal Piety: Civil Islam and Secularism in Contemporary Turkey*, PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, 2009.

[32] Hakan Yavuz, *Islamist Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: 2003); Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: 2002).

[33] Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: 1996); Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: 2002).

[34] Şerif Mardin, *Religion, Society, and Modernity in Turkey* (Syracuse: 2006); Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford: 2007).

### Being an *Imam-Hatipli* and the Imam-Hatip School Community

The students and graduates of Imam-Hatip schools are aware and proud of the distinctive identity that the schools ingrain in them. At the website www.imamhatip.com, one student had composed the following quatrain:[35]

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| We are not from science schools, we don't feign prestige | Biz fen liseli değiliz ki, havamız olsun |
| We are not from teachers' schools, we don't get extra points | Biz öğretmen liseli değiliz ki, Ek puanımız olsun |
| We are not from general schools, we don't take it easy | Biz düz liseli değiliz ki, rahatımız olsun |
| We are Imam-Hatip students, long live our country. | Biz imam-hatipliyiz, vatan sağolsun. |

*İmam-hatipli*, which can best be translated as "one who is from an Imam-Hatip school," is an important and palpable identity marker to many members of the Imam-Hatip school community. During interviews and in responses to my questionnaire, Imam-Hatip school students and graduates repeatedly said: "Being from an Imam-Hatip school is a privilege" (*İmam-hatiplilik ayrıcalıktır*).[36] Similarly, Eyüp Fatsa, the AKP's deputy from Ordu, told reporters that being an *imam-hatipli* was "a distinction."[37]

When I became aware of the weight that the *imam-hatipli* identity carried, I started asking members of the Imam-Hatip school community about it. In one instance, I spent quite a lot of time talking to three Imam-Hatip school graduates, related to each other by either blood or marriage. Aziz and Yakut are siblings who attended an Imam-Hatip school in Istanbul. Durmuş is married to Yakut and works at the same local AKP municipality as Aziz. After Aziz learned that Durmuş was an Imam-Hatip school graduate from Rize, he introduced Durmuş to his sister. Durmuş and Yakut have since been happily married. When I asked Aziz how he could make such a huge decision on behalf of his sister based on the *imam-hatipli* marker, he replied: "*İmam-hatipli*s share a belief and value system that affects and shapes all aspects of life.... There is nothing that can take the place of Imam-Hatip schools. It is impossible to find the moral and social environment of Imam-Hatip schools at any other school

[35] http://www.imamhatip.com/kamusalalan, last accessed February 2011.
[36] I discuss this questionnaire in more detail later in this chapter.
[37] "İddianamedeki 71 İsim," *Milliyet*, March 16, 2008.

in the country.… The Imam-Hatip schools provide a model not just for Turkey, but for the rest of the world." In deference to her brother, Yakut added: "Being an *imam-hatipli* means that you live your life and conduct your relations in ways that are befitting of Islamic norms and practices. It means that you inform those around you about Islam and call them to religion."

Being an *imam-hatipli* provides sufficient reason for someone to create friendships or establish ties with other similar members of Turkish society. In the words of Yahya, a second-year student at Istanbul University,

When I started university, I looked around for other Imam-Hatip school graduates and found Ali.… It does not matter that Ali did not attend my Imam-Hatip school. Similarly, it does not matter that he graduated three years before I did. I knew that he and I would become friends because of our shared experience.

Like Yahya, Aysu, a graduate of Bilgi University, told me that she automatically became good friends with the other two Imam-Hatip school graduates in her class of fifty-five students. She recalled: "We found other *imam-hatipli*s in upper classes and formed our clique. We understood each other's problems better."

The notion of a shared identity transcends time and space for Imam-Hatip school students and graduates. The hallway of Istanbul Imam-Hatip School features a display case with pictures of the school's prominent graduates, including Prime Minister Erdoğan. The principal told me that he had it installed so students would feel "as one" with the graduates. He added, "When these students graduate, they know that there are others out there whom they can turn to for support."[38] Durmuş had emphasized a similar point when he noted: "Identifying yourself as an *imam-hatipli* means that you belong to a generation (*nesil*) that is nourished by the spirit of Islam and knowledge of the Qur'an."

This notion of belonging to a generation is distinctive and widespread among members of the Imam-Hatip school community. Students and graduates of Imam-Hatip schools will commonly say: "As an *imam-hatipli*, I am a part of the generation." I have heard Hayrettin Karaman liken the Imam-Hatip school generation to "the missing link of a spiritual army that has devoted itself to the service of Islam and surrendered itself to God."[39] In one of his columns, Ahmet Hakan, a well-known journalist and an Imam-Hatip school graduate, identified the Imam-Hatip school

[38] *İmam-hatiplilik* can be thought of as an Imam-Hatip school *esprit de corps*.
[39] Hayrettin Karaman, *Bir Varmış Bir Yokmuş* (Istanbul: 2008), vol. 2, 160.

generation as comprising "missionaristic youth who would save the country in ways that graduates of general high schools would not."[40]

In their intellectual pursuits and civic engagements, Imam-Hatip school graduates employ this notion of belonging to a generation. The journal that Karaman founded and edited in the late 1970s was appropriately named *Nesil* (Generation). Likewise, two of the leading journals of the 1990s by Imam-Hatip school graduates were entitled: *İmam-Hatipli Nesil* (The Generation of Imam-Hatip School Graduates) and *İmam-Hatip Nesli* (Imam-Hatip School Generation). The inaugural issue of *İmam-Hatipli Nesil* stated: "This [Imam-Hatip school] generation is coming to rescue a youth which has forgotten its history, disrespected its national and humane values, drowned in darkness, and has looked for happiness in the West, with extended hands."[41] Similarly, one of the poems published in *İmam-Hatip Nesli* reads:

> We are lovers of God, we are believers,
> We are in the Sunnah's light and God's path,
> We are the imam-hatip generation; we walk in this path,
> We will not bow down; our heads will remain in the heavens.[42]

The majority of Imam-Hatip school graduates with whom I have spoken pledged their allegiance to the Imam-Hatip school system, but there were some graduates who rendered their primary allegiances to the particular schools that they attended. These graduates attended Kartal Anatolian and Kadıköy Anatolian Imam-Hatip Schools. When they discussed the extent to which *imam-hatipli* was an identity marker, they made a point of differentiating between an upper (*üst*) and a lower (*alt*) identity. They said that while their lower identities were *imam-hatipli*, their upper identities were *Kartallı* (from Kartal) or *Kadıköylü* (from Kadıköy).

Regardless of whether it is upper or lower, the *imam-hatipli* identity is able to form the basis of the greater Imam-Hatip school community. The Imam-Hatip school community consists of individuals who are linked by their connections to Imam-Hatip schools or their students.[43] Some

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[40] Ahmet Hakan writes for the secularist daily, *Hürriyet* (Liberty). Ahmet Hakan, "Aykırı Mezundan İmam-Hatip Ağıdı," *Hürriyet*, July 23, 2009.

[41] Mehtap Diktaş, "Özlenen Nesil," *İmam-Hatipli Nesil* 1 (December 1995): 18.

[42] Şehri Nalbant, "İmam-Hatiplim," *İmam-Hatip Nesli* 8 (December 1996): 13.

[43] The Imam-Hatip school community can also be thought of as a "functional community." According to social theorist James Coleman, a functional community is a "community in which social norms and sanctions, including those that cross generations, arise out of the social structure itself, and both reinforce and perpetuate that structure." James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New