

# КУРДСКИЙ ДЖАМААТ МЕНЗИЛЬ И ТУРЕЦКИЙ НАЦИОНАЛИЗМ: ПАРАДОКСЫ ВНУТРЕННЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ ТУРЦИИ В ОБЛАСТИ КУЛЬТУРЫ И РЕЛИГИИ\*

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*В этой статье автор выделяет ряд вопросов, касающихся политических аспектов деятельности общины Мензиль в Турции. Он прослеживает духовную генеалогию и историю происхождения джамаата Мензиль, а также изучает его рост во времена шейха М. Эрала и его нынешнее состояние. Также рассмотрены актуальные проблемы отношений власти и джамаатов в нынешней повестке дня Турции.*

**Ключевые слова:** *ислам в Турции, джамааты, мусульманские общины, Мензиль, Партия справедливости и развития.*

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# KURDISH JAMA'AT MENZIL AND TURKISH NATIONALISM: PARADOXES OF TURKEY'S DOMESTIC POLICY IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE AND RELIGION\*

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*In this paper, the author attempts to outline a number of issues concerning political aspects of the Menzil community's activities in Turkey. He also examines the actual problems of interconnections between authorities and Turkish jama'ats in Turkey's current agenda. He traces back the spiritual genealogy and history of origin of the jama'at, as well as studies its growth at the times of Sheikh M. Erol and its current condition.*

**Keywords:** *Islam in Turkey, Jama'ats, Muslim communities, Menzil, Justice and Development Party.*

**O**f the major Muslim communities in Turkey, one of the most interesting is a community of people that aligns itself with Abdulbaki Erol and the religious and pilgrimage center in Menzil (a village in the district of Kahta, Adıyaman Province), whose name has become part of their self-identification. This fraternity, which follows the Naqshbandi tradition, is notable for the number of its members/participants, religious practices, political stances, and social orientation toward attracting people with deviant behavior, among many other things. At the same time, this community (jama'at<sup>1</sup>) is not an exception from the overall picture; its development has been shaped in many ways by the trend of the modernization of Turkish Muslim communities in the republican period and the adaptation of Muslims to the new conditions of the national secular state.

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## HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF THE COMMUNITY

**A**ccording to the Konsensus (social research company), the number of followers in the Menzil community in 2011 numbered more than 700,000 people (Yildirim, 2016, December 1). According to this data, the Menzils shared second place with the followers of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan for largest Muslim community in Turkey, while those of Fethullah Gülen held first place by a large margin. Some members of the Menzil

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1. In this article, the terms *tarikah* and *jama'at* are used interchangeably. Despite some differences, they are used both by the followers of religious leaders and by researchers for today's Turkish Muslim communities with common ideology and/or charismatic leader.

community are confident that their jama'at is the most numerous (Harmanci, 2013, December 19). Sociological statistics are objective to a degree, but even they can hardly provide the exact values. By general estimate, the community most likely has hundreds of thousands of followers, but not all of them are involved in the sect's everyday communal or religious practices. Over the past decades, the number of people who have visited Menzil village and "repented" (*tevbe almak*) is most likely a seven-digit number. According to nonverified data, the village receives up to 500,000 guests every year (Yalniz, 2006, November 16).

The spiritual genealogy of Menzil sheikhs can be traced to the influential Sufi authority Khalid Baghdadi (d. 1827), the renewalist of the *tarik* founded by Bahauddin Naqshband (d. 1389), and further back to Companion of the Prophet Abu Bakr and to Muhammad himself (Hatme-i hacedan..., 1998). From Baghdadi, the *ijaza* (permission) for the *Tarikat* leadership was passed through his students to the famous Sufi Sibgatullah Arvasi (d. 1870) and his caliph Abdullah Taha, who lived in Bitlis, an Eastern Anatolia region. During World War I, the family of Taha's disciple Mohammed Ziyauddin fought on the Eastern Front. In this war, Ziyauddin lost his two brothers and a hand, but his courage was appreciated by Atatürk himself (Baz, 2014).

It was Ahmed Haznevi, who lived in Syria near the Turkish border and was the successor of Ziyauddin (d. 1924), from whom Abdulkhakim Huseyni, the founder and father of the current and previous community leaders, received his *ijaza*. In his declining years, Huseyni bought a large plot of land in the Menzil village (the current official name is Durak<sup>2</sup>) and settled there. He died in 1972, leaving the post of sheikh to his son, Muhammed Rashit Erol (born in 1930 in Baykan, Siirt Province), under whom an inconspicuous village in a distant province acquired extreme popularity (Kara, 2003). The sheikh, known for his ancestry (apart from the Sufi component, his family is believed to be descendants of the Prophet) and devoutness, began to attract visitors, which mainly comprised small business representatives, lower and middle managers, and members of their families from all over Turkey. Many alcoholics, gamblers, and criminals came and were often cured of their addictions. Although some believe M. R. Erol to be the founder of the Menzil Jama'at (Menzil cemaati. In Wikipedia), Seyda Hazretleri, or the godly descendant of the Prophet as his followers call him, has continued work of his father Abdulkhakim. Stressing the importance of working with the general public, Huseyni said:

*Tarikats that used to be schools for cultivating evliya (Friends of the Almighty), have now become the schools for faith salvation...People used to travel for years looking for a sheikh...While now one must walk from door to door...[it is] not the time of the Tarikat, the goal is to save the faith....[Çakır, 2012, p. 70].*

However, unlike his father, M. R. Erol emphasized the Sufi component, creating a unique synthesis of missionary work, folk healing, and mysticism. He himself denied giving away any healing grace ("You'd think the healing is in my pocket so that I could give it away?" [Çakır, 2012, p. 72]); however, he attracted the ill and disabled people, people who were childless, and people suffering from drug addictions of all kinds. Legends about his supernatural abilities followed him.

After the military coup of 1980, an ever-increasing flow of visitors to Menzil village raised flags to the authorities, and in 1983, M. Erol was sent into exile to the west on the Gokcheada

2. Both *durak* (Turkish) and *menzil* (Arabic) denote more or less the same — an encampment, stop, or point of arrival. In the era of Kemalism, many words and names that had Arabic roots were replaced with Turkish words or new words were invented based on Turkish roots.

Island in Chanakkale Province. Three years later, as a personal request from Prime Minister Turgut Özal to President (and the leader of the group that staged the coup d'état in 1980) Kenan Evren, M. R. Erol was allowed to return to Menzil (Özcan, 2016). In 1991, the sheikh of the jama'at was attacked by his namesake, a 17-year-old Murat Erol from Denizli, who managed to stick a needle laced with poison at a hand-kissing ceremony during Ramadan. The criminal almost got lynched but was rescued (according to some reports by plain-clothes police officers who were surprisingly close at the time of the incident). Later, Murat explained that the reason for his actions stemmed from his belief that the sheikh was an “enemy of Islam,” (Konuralp, 2006, October 25) but the facts of the event remain dubious. The sheikh survived, but the poison seemed to have undermined his already fragile health. He passed away two years later. Since then, the jama'at has been headed by Abdulbaki Erol, his younger brother (from Huseyni's second wife), whom his disciples reverently call “Gavs-i Sani” — that is, “second” after father “Gavs,” or the “Assistant [in spiritual matters]” (“Big Gavs” was how Abdul Qadir Jilani [d. 1166], one of the most famous Sufis of all time and the founder of Tariqat Qadiriyyah, was called.)

## SUFISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

Sufism was a widespread phenomenon in the Ottoman Empire and was in fact a Turkish form of Islam that influenced all social strata of the Ottoman state. Apart from the Sufi brotherhoods' huge number of followers among the ordinary subjects of the sultan, many late Osman *ulama* and *Sheikh-ul-Islams* were also close to the Sufis, especially to the Khalidiya branch of the Naqshbandiyya, to which Menzil also belonged. Sufi leaders performed a kind of a feedback function between the court and the people, while the Islamic authorities legitimized the religion of the lower and middle strata (Şeker, 2007). In the republican period, Atatürk tried to level out the Islamic factor, and although his actions were considered successful at the state level and in the public sphere, the situation was different at the grassroots level. The Sufi brotherhoods (i.e., the tarikats, especially of the Naqshbandi nature) perceived the persecution as something inevitable and continued their activities despite the new conditions, which officially declared them as illegal.

Ismail Kara (2010), the Turkish Islamic scholar, summarized the Sufis' and dervishes' reaction to these actions as follows (p. 155):

1. *Tekkes [Sufi educational institutions] cannot be closed. It is not the same as closing some buildings or dwellings. Because the whole world is a tekke. This profession has no need for crowns, clothes, formality.*
2. *Living in tasavvuf [same as Sufism] is a natural human need. Therefore, it will be satisfied in various ways.*
3. *Tasavvuf is the education of the soul. It does not need tekke. Education is passed from soul to soul.*
4. *The government has done what it considers to be right. There is a (secret) meaning in everything that the government does. One of the names of Allah is 'Hakim' (Ruler) and is manifested in the government ('bukumet' in Turkish is derived from 'hakim').*
5. *Grace has run out. There is no use in preserving and prolonging the existence of tekke by force.*

6. *This is fate. There is no countering it. It is like holding a paddle against the stream.*
7. *Anything and everything is a manifestation of Allah's names. Both His mercy and His wrath are good.*
8. *The tekkes were as good as closed because they could not be renewed.*
9. *The closure of the tekkes has not affected any religious foundation. On the contrary, we are going back to the basics. There were no tekkes in the time of the Holy Prophet.*
10. *From now on, our time is not that of Tarikats.*

The sultanate as a form of the Muslim regime ceased to exist, and Sufis came to terms with it. Their activities, however, with the exception of rare personalities and periods, had little to do with politics (except for the Mevlevi brotherhood); therefore, the Sufis were quick to adopt the secular nature of the new republic and were very eager to adapt to the new conditions.

The new policy in the public sphere, as well as in education, culture, and so forth, deeply affected the Sufis themselves, who had to adapt to the new conditions in order to influence society. Republican authorities as good as forced them to be more rational, economically oriented, and urbanized, and to use all the tools of the new Turkish state and society (Mardin et al., 2012). The transition from the empire and traditional society to the modern national state played a key role in this process. Many traditional formations, including Sufi tarikats that, in the time of the Ottoman, had existed in relative integrity, were forced to rebuild themselves in the new conditions when community activities, which in the premodern societies had been done in a single institutional context, became “dispersed between various institutions” (Berger, 2012, p.11). Thus, the Sufis became neo-Sufis, and the tarikats became jama'ats.

By removing the institution of official Islamic clerics, the Kemalists prompted wider sections of the population to rethink religion and ensured the spread of religious authority among various Muslim leaders, most of whom received recognition solely because of their personal merits or charisma. In addition, the fact that many official Muslim leaders, even those far from Sufism, had gone underground caused an unprecedented increase in the quality of education in secret madrasahs and tekkes (Sarıkaya, 2000). The Sufis, in a society where Islam was the common denominator, turned out to be the most enduring and self-organized group of Muslims, and gradually almost all Islamic activities in Turkey (except for the State Administration for Religious Affairs) became concentrated around particular Sufi authorities. The Naqshbandi network remained and spread even during the toughest years of repression.

Although the main goal of the Sufi tarikats under the Muslim regime was to ensure the spiritual growth and improvement of Muslims (who, except for representatives of other *millet*s, officially were considered as subjects in the Ottoman Empire), their main mission in the age of laicism was to “save the faith” (i.e., to increase the steadily shrinking number of observant Muslims). A decrease in the number of so-called formal Muslims and an increase in the number of followers of various jama'ats were two tendencies in Turkey since the 1920s.

Atatürk and his associates banned tarikats in 1925 and generally introduced a French-style laical hostility to religion in the public sphere. (We will not go into the motives and reasons for this policy.) At times, the level of aggression reached what Berger (2012) denoted

the third type of secularism, which was encountered, for example, in the U.S.S.R. (Berger, 2012), but this was more of an exception. People were not forbidden from being practicing believers, but they were viewed as second-rate people and many social elevators were closed a priori for them. Muslims openly reading *zikr* or gathering in numbers more than 10 (not to mention hundreds or thousands) in a certain place was out of question at the time. However, these oppressive norms against Muslims were one of the factors that led to the defeat of the Turkish Republican People's Party at the very first alternative elections in 1950. Adnan Menderes and his Democratic Party substantially eased the pressure on Islam, and Turkish *jama'ats* with strong internal dynamics had long been waiting for this opportunity (Zarcone, 1993). They created what Şerif Mardin, the famous Turkish scholar, called a kind of a "synthesis of religious and economic life" (Mardin et al., 2012, pp. 102–103). Moreover, the *jama'ats* served as a force that helped the Muslims modernize and not feel alienated in the new reality. Using Roy's (2013) hypothesis, I can argue that in fact Muslim communities (and Islamist parties) have even secularized Muslims on some level by automatically accepting the legitimacy of the Turkish national state with laicism as one of its pillars.

The military coup of 1980 was stacked against the violence and chaos of the late 1970s that the country was plunged into but that were primarily against the communist and leftist movements in general, including the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party. Despite the general negative attitude toward Islam, the Turkish political and military elite began to accept the fact that religion could not be ignored and that to deny it access to legal means of political representation was dangerous. In addition, Turgut Özal, who, despite his secular lifestyle, performed *namaz* and was close to Sufi circles, and his Muslim-tolerant Motherland Party unexpectedly (and counter to the wishes of coupists with their own party) won the first election after the coup (Uturgauri & Ulchenko, 2009). His successful economic reforms and economic liberalization, among other things, caused the rapid development of the Anatolian hinterland and the growth of the notorious "green capital" owned by the conservative bourgeoisie.

### **KURDISH JAMA'AT OF THE TURKISH NATIONALISTS**

**I**n this context, politicians' interest in Menzil village is not surprising because it (a) attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims; (b) is located in the east (i.e., in the areas densely populated by Kurds); (c) has a community led by Kurds (albeit with the legendary descent from the Prophet); and (d) adheres to Islamic dogmas with no differentiation of nationalities but still holds respect for the general Turkish nation. In the 1970s, the emergence of the National Action Party (NAP) began a cautious rapprochement of the Turkish nationalistic ideology that had been critical of religion in general with Islam coming out into the open. Islamic *jama'ats* in eastern Turkey may not have been fostering ideal citizens for the Kemalists, but they were nevertheless the lesser evil compared to communism and especially Kurdish terrorism and, eventually, a homegrown evil that was easier to co-opt than to destroy. Perhaps that is why in the 1970s and 1980s, Turkish nationalists took interest in Menzil village and its inhabitants the neo-Sufis, who were loyal to the state and combined the Naqshbandi traditions, Turkish identity, and Sunnism (Öztürk, 2009). There were rumors that none other than Alparslan Türkeş, the creator and leader of the NAP, was a follower of M. Erol (Bacaksız, 2012, October 31). This was most likely not true, but the fact remains that the nationalists tried to "play" in the Islamic field and attract the electorate that was the object of keen interest of political Islam parties. In

the 1970s and 1980s, many nationalists, the Ülkücü, became Menzil followers. In 1993, a pro-Islamic group within the NAP led by Muhsin Yazicioglu (served a 6-year-term in prison after the 1980 coup) broke away from the party and started a Turk-Islamic synthesis experiment at the party level. He often spoke with the leaders of Menzil and other jama'ats, clearly counting on electoral support. According to some sources, Menzil did support him (Atay, 2015, May 28), but Yazicioglu failed to make great progress<sup>3</sup>. His Great Unity Party (GUP) consistently attracted 300,000 to 500,000 votes, but it is difficult to say how many of them had visited Menzil village. The Adiyaman Province also could not show a large percent of votes for the GUP. Considering that throughout the last decade, Menzil almost openly supported the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP; see below for more details), but the GUP managed to secure nearly as much votes (and even more on municipal elections). We can assume that the electoral effect from Yazicioglu and his party's proximity to Menzil was definitely not decisive.

It can be argued that the succession of sheikhs from the Erol family has been politically oriented toward the pro-Muslim parties with a nationalistic rhetoric advocating a liberal economy and support for small businesses. According to Akyeshilmen and Özcan (2014), Turkish researchers from Selçuk University, Menzil supported the NAP from 1973 to 1977; the Islamists (i.e., the National Salvation Party later succeeded by the Welfare Party), along with the NAP, in 1977 and from 1987 to 1995; Turgut Özal's Motherland Party in 1983 (nationalists and Islamists were banned at the time); and Yazicioglu's GUP from 1995 to 2002. From 2002 to the present day, the jama'at has been the electoral base of the ruling JDP, and from that point on, the political model of the state's interaction with the jama'at began to change.

### **THE “ENCOMPASSMENT OF NAQSHBANDISM” BY THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY**

The founders of the JDP<sup>4</sup> came from Islamist parties that succeeded each other after the bans but remained united by the brand of the National View movement and its leader Necmettin Erbakan. After the Virtue Party was banned in 2001, the schism that had long been brewing among the Islamists was finally formalized, and most politicians and members of parliament switched to the new JDP, while others remained with Erbakan, who founded the Happiness Party. The JDP made a clean sweep of the Islamist slogans and declared a new goal of democratization in Turkey. However, they understood full well that in a country with a centuries-old Muslim tradition and the overwhelming majority of Islam, democratization would inevitably bring the Muslims and Islam to the forefront (Çakır, 1994, May 14) and economic liberalization would allow the Anatolian hinterland to access the markets. By successful application of political technologies and global economic environment, the JDP conducted a series of reforms that dramatically increased the country's GDP and brought it closer to the Copenhagen criteria for joining the EU.

The JDP gradually overcame the intolerance of the state and bureaucracy toward Muslims and legitimized the presence of Islam in the public sphere. It can be said that Turkey in the 2000s switched from the French model of aggressive laicism to Anglo-Saxon pluralistic secularism. Turkish jama'ats have evolved from being the undesirables to becoming the active

3. Yazicioglu died in a helicopter crash in 2009 with several colleagues, the circumstances of the death are still not clear.

4. Many founding fathers are no longer in official lists since they were blotted out after falling out of favor with Turkish President Recep Erdogan.

participants of social and political processes. The JDP attracted the supporters of Muslim neo-Sufi communities to its side on three levels.

Personal level – the electorate. Through its rhetoric, campaign promises, adoption of laws (e.g., lifting the ban on head scarves in state offices), as well as party leaders' demonstrations of their "muslimness", which worked both in the 1950s and in the 1980s and continues to serve its purpose in the 21st century, the JDP managed to ride the wave of Muslim resentment.

Collective level – cooperation and trade. Apart from the fact that, since 2002, the barriers to Muslims' employment in state bodies have been removed, the JDP began to systematically fill the vacancies with people from various communities (e.g., followers of Iskender Pasha<sup>5</sup>, followers of Gülen, Erenköy, etc<sup>6</sup>). Menzil also participated in this bargaining, with particular focus on the health sector (Aksaç, 2016, November 11). Officials periodically reject the reasonable suspicion that representatives of Muslim communities were co-opting into bureaucracy and politics (Çelik, H. 2012, February 20; Akdag, 2016, December 13), but de facto everything was different. Many observers discussed the replacement of F. Gülen's staff<sup>7</sup> with that of Menzil (Gülen Cemaati yerine..., 2016, August 17); some wondered if the Menzils would be removed in the same way in the future (Aral, 2016, November 16).

Political level – oath. Since around 2007 or 2008, Erdogan began to consolidate power in the hands of one person, pinpointing on the image of a Muslim leader chosen as an ideological framework for the process (Saetov, 2015, November 10). In this context, any alternative Muslim authorities became competitors in the electoral field, in society, and in state bodies. Therefore, they eventually had to either become completely loyal, which in Muslim terms means to take the oath of allegiance (*biat etmek*), or be marginalized until complete elimination. This approach is fully in line with the Kemalist methods of the single-party period, the only difference being that to join the elite, one would have to reject public observance of Islam. However, now the opposite is true and, figuratively speaking, beards are in fashion, but the state is nonetheless intolerant to alternative opinions. Some communities, including Menzil, have agreed even to this level of cooperation. Two notable things are that the top public officials including Erdogan attended the opening, for example, of Menzil's jama'at hospitals (Erdoğan'ın EMSEY hastanesi..., 2012, May 29) and that the associations of jama'at businessmen express open support for the authorities.

The main question remains – what will happen to neo-Sufi jama'ats if such a policy continues for an extended period of time? Mardin (2012) believed that the JDP had "encompassed the Naqshbandism" and that this was "the success of Kemalism" (P. 44), and I tend to agree with them. Despite a period of aggressive secularism, the jama'ats managed to subsist and develop due to several factors: The main one being the desire to preserve the Islamic faith in the absence of state support and, moreover, with the authorities' negative attitude toward religion. The jama'ats proceeded from the premise of "who if not us" and underwent strong reformation, a transformation into a form that suited the political and social environ-

5. Initially, this jama'at had close ties with Erbakan, and many politicians were the followers of Sheikh Mehmet Zahid Kotku and his successor Esad Coshan.

6. In an interview with H. (43 years old): "The state offered no jobs in this municipality until the lists with names were received from jama'ats. Fethullahists sent them immediately, they had a lot of trained personnel, while with the others it sometimes took months". Interview by I.Saetov.

7. The conflict between Erdogan and Gülen officially started in the fall of 2013 and has now reached its peak. Tens of thousands of people suspected in supporting Gülen have been arrested, and more than one hundred thousand have been fired. After the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, the Turkish authorities blamed it to F. Gülen. By default, all his supporters are suspected of terrorism. Gülen himself bluntly denies the charges.

ment. Once the environment changed – namely, when Islam was released into the public space and the bans for the Muslims to be represented in all spheres of Turkish society were lifted – the jama'ats lost their initiative. The JDP encompassed its mission in its strategic discourse and absorbed it institutionally; the matter of “saving the faith” took second place because there was no obvious oppression (although the electorate was still frightened of the Kemalists before the elections and the number of observant Muslims is decreasing slowly but steadily). The communities are now faced with a choice: to reformulate their goals and objectives or their essence in general or to dissolve into the JDP's electorate, party organs, and institutions. In my opinion, if the current political conditions remain unchanged, the return of the Jama'ats to 'tarikatism' and their complete depoliticization, their orientation toward the spiritual realm, and their focus on self-improvement and individual search for God seem plausible. This would allow the opposition to survive, as Erdogan's main concern is public disloyalty that can affect the electorate. For the loyal neo-Sufis, this would be a way to avoid reflection on the essence of modern power, assessment of politics, and analysis of the moral aspects of cooperation with politicians. Active religious and social efforts will remain the prerogative of state bodies, primarily the Office for Religious Affairs and its related structures, which are likely to lead to religious emasculation and formalization. If neo-Sufis “return” to more mystical forms, then such neo-tarikats will be very different from past normative models, which will already be a new phenomenon in the postsecularism era. In this era, we will speak of *zikrs* via video messengers, work with augmented reality, fast with the use of pills produced by nanotechnologies, engage in Sufi art therapy, and so on.

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