

Muslim Mags Multiply



ISLAMIC magazines and newspapers are making a comeback in Turkey. They are now being greatly expanded, and the quality, design and presentation of these publications have improved immensely. Although of the number of books published in 1934, only 1.7% were Islamic, this has now increased to 7%, and in addition, over the last 35 years, the number of Islamic publishers have increased ten-fold. Islamic books are currently enjoying high circulation rates, especially *tafsir* and *hadith* books which are selling extremely well. In 1985, *Ihya-i Ulum al-Din* by Al-Ghazali sold 200,000 copies, Kandahlavi's *Hayat us Sahaba* 80,000 copies, and Ali Reza Demircan's interesting but somewhat narrow and confining work *Islam'a Gore Cinsel Hayat'*, (Sexual Life According to Islam) sold 120,000 copies.

Islamic magazines also attract a wide readership and have high sales figures, although the same cannot be said for the newspapers. Out of the total daily circulation of newspapers of 2,790,000 in November 1985, the average circulation of Islamic dailies, *Turkiye*, *Milli Gazete* and *Yani Nesil*

was only 1000,000; a mere 3% of the total.

Turkey has a long history of book and newspaper publication. The first printing machine was brought by Jewish immigrants exiled from Spain, and the first printing house was established in 1494, just 41 years after the conquest of Constantinople, and 39 years after Gutenberg. In 1494, the brothers David and Samuel Nahmes printed the five volumes known as The Book of the Prophet Moses, in Istanbul. After this, printing houses owned by other Jews and Armenians were gradually established. According to reliable sources, between 1494 and 1729, 37 printing houses were established by ethnic minorities and foreign missions, all of which issued books in non-Turkish languages in order that the thousands of skilled craftsmen who were employed as handwriters in Turkish, would not be deprived of their livelihoods.

In fact the establishment of printing houses to produce Turkish language books became a vital issue by the 18th century, and this led Abraham Mufarrika and Said Efendi, the son of Yirmisekiz Mehmet Celebi, Turkish

Ambassador to Paris, to seek permission from the Sultan to establish a Turkish language printing house in Istanbul. Such a venture house was successfully set up in 1727 under the auspices of Sultan Ahmet II, and within two months produced its first book, the *Vankulu Dictionary*.

The first known newspaper in Turkey was published in 1795 under the name of *Bulletin des Nouvelles* but was short-lived and was in French. Also published in French was *Oriental* which was printed in Izmir, and became the first non-official newspaper. *Takvim-i-Vekayf* published in Istanbul in 1831 during the reign of Sultan Mahmut II, was the first newspaper in Turkish, and for a short while was also the official Turkish newspaper.

It was not until 1840 that the first non-official Turkish language newspaper was published, and it being the reflection of the 1839 Tanzimat Edict, contributed a great deal to the cultivation of some talented journalists who were later to become statesmen. This publication called *Ceride-i-Havadis* was the handiwork of a Briton - William Chirchill - who was a businessman in Istanbul. In the period between 1839 and the declaration of the Turkish Republic, a lot of journals and magazines were published which conveyed Islamic and Nationalist ideas, most of which were banned or censored at one time or another, but all of which are important indicators to the westernisation process then taking root in Turkey. Of these it is necessary to mention Murat Bey's *Mizan* which took the stance that the Ottoman Empire should be radically reformed.

Articles written by the first Turkish positivist and naturalist, Bashir Fuad, which were printed in the daily *Ikdam* have also acquired importance over the last four decades.

The period between 1908 to 1923 was important for the rise in influence of journals such as Omar Seyfeddin's *Genc Kalemler*, Ziya Gokalp's *Yeni Mecmua*, Dr Abdullah Djevdet's *Itihad*, and Ali Ihsan Tokgoz's *Servet-i-Funun*. During the same period two particular journals *Sirat-i-Mustakim* and *Sebil 'ur Resad* were prominent conveyors of Islamic thought. By 1925 however, just after the Shaikh Said revolt in the Eastern region of Turkey, extraordinary restrictions were brought to bear on the Turkish media and many important journals were closed down by the government.

It was only in 1943 that the first real intellectual response by the Muslims to the Turkish regime was initia-

ted by the work of the eminent Turkish poet Necip Fazil Kisakurek, who began the journal *Buyuk Dogu* (Great Orient) in cooperation with other Muslim intellectuals. It is also important to mention the role and influence that the Islamic daily *Bugun* (Today) had on the Muslim masses. The owner and editor of *Bugun* was Mahmet Sevket Eyy, a graduate of the Faculty of Political Sciences, who also owned a publishing house called *Bedir* specialising in the publication of Islamic classics and religious books. *Bugun* was a great success, and was the first newspaper of its kind to achieve a daily circulation of 100,000.

During the 1960's the most significant event, from the intellectual point of view, was the establishment of the monthly *Dirilis* (Resurrection) by Sezai Karakoc, a prominent poet. By the 1970's once again, the Islamic movement reached a turning point when the Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party) was founded, and two Islamic dailies were started - *Yeni Devir* (The New Age) and *Milli Gazete* (National Gazette). The former of these publications established itself as a voice of intellectual Muslims, whilst the latter became house newspaper for the MSP. *Yeni Devir* however was forced by circumstances to stop publication, and *Milli Gazete* which only enjoyed a small circulation is now published as the daily bulletin of Refah Partisi (wealth party) set up by the same political group after the abolition of existing political parties by the government following the 12th September 1980 coup.

By 1984 however, Islamic publication was starting to enjoy renewed success, when the Dusunce Group, led by Ali Bulac, established *Insan* (Human), publications which produced works by Malik bin Nabi, Maurice Bucaille, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossain Nasr, Muhammed Asad, Ziauddin Sardar and other leading writers in Turkish translations. This group is currently attempting to establish a dialogue between Salafi and Sufi movements in Turkey, as it is realised that Sufism has very deep roots, an impressive intellectual tradition, and is a powerful force within society whilst Salafi ideas are important for the purification of non-Islamic concepts from within Islamic tradition. Other radical groups of intellectuals also set up important publications, for example *Inkilap*, *Bir*, and *Beyan* publications. These books have proved to be very attractive to Turkish Muslim youth and are considered to be the beginning of a new intellectual trend

in the country.

Dergah publication have also played an important role in the intellectual formation of Turkish Muslims. The mastermind behind Dergah was the nationalist thinker Nuredin Topcu whose approach tends to synthesize nationalism and Islam, and whose publications range from Islamic and Sufi classics, literary criticism, economic research to encyclopaedic works. In addition to Sufi classics such as the *Risala of Kalabazi*, they have also published the basic works of Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Taymiyya. The Encyclopaedia of Turkish language and literature is also in preparation: it will run to eight volumes and is likely to become the most important Turkish source in the field.

Another recent interesting development is the entry of the Sufi Tarikat (brotherhoods) into the magazine and book publishing world. A Nakshabandi group publishes three magazines, one bi-monthly *Ilim ve sanat* (Science and Arts) and two monthlies *Kadin Ve Aile* and *Islam*. One of these magazines *Islam* has the largest circulation of any Islamic magazine in Turkey : 110,000. The bi-monthly *Ilim Ve Sanat* is also widely read by Muslim intellectuals and university students. Other magazines such as *Icmal*, *Mekup* and *Selam* are popular amongst Sufi circles.

Also widely read in Turkey are the books by the world renowned scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, who aimed to reinforce the Islamic beliefs of the people as a basic philosophy, and interpret the Qur'an by drawing upon examples from nature and science. Although the books entitled *Risal-i Nur* were previously forbidden for many years, with those who read them facing the prospect of arrest and prosecution by virtue of the fact that religious ceremonies were forbidden by Turkish criminal law, today the publication and distribution of such books is completely unrestricted. Two Risale-i Nur groups published two monthlies *Sizinti* (Tricklings) and *Zafer* (Victory) with the circulation of each not falling below 30,000.

Because of the development in Turkey of a multitude of varying religious and political groupings, each with their own mouth-piece, there is immense competition between publications, as each tries to capture the biggest slice of the readership. In order to attract more readers they employ such methods as organizing lotteries and chance games, and distributing prizes to their readers. How-

ever, in this popularity drive it is Islamic publications which tend to lose out a great deal since for the other publications any method is legitimate so long as it boosts sales figures. With Turkey's accelerated westernisation rate over the last 20 years, and with the assistance of the Turkish television media which gears its broadcasts to promoting western society and developing Turkey along the same lines, 'successful' newspapers, magazines and other publications have been those that satisfy the appetite of the masses for ever increasing doses of western culture and values. For example, imitating their western counterparts, Turkish editors have found that nothing beats the sexual exploitation of women for popularity, and there is nothing to compare with colourful display of naked women to boost sales. In this game, ideological newspapers are losing ground fast and whereas leftist newspapers such as *Cumhuriyet* and *Tercuman* have been scrupulous enough not to compromise their ideological principles, they have not been able to maintain their readers' interest, who are turning more and more to western style, flimsy glossy magazines which sell well.

Islamic publications are also having lack of success due to lack of up-to-date technology. The publishers of these magazines have tended to exhibit an appalling lack of understanding about the significance of adopting new communication technologies and have clung hopelessly to outmoded media techniques. These organisations and their staff have consequently failed dismally to adapt themselves to the high speed of contemporary media technology.

So although Turkish Islamic magazines have showed a promising resurgence over recent years, a great leap in mentality and outlook on the part of editors and publishers is required if this momentum is to be maintained. Unless radical changes are soon made to these publications and they are able to prove that they can successfully compete in the world of modern media technology, their readership will decline further and their economic viability will be in peril. This would be a pity for it will not only fail to bring Islamic intellectual flowering in Turkey to fruition, it will also deprive the Turkish people of that fragile link, - the umbilical cord - that joins them to their own tradition, culture and religion.

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