

Concrete Empire: The politics of mosque-building in AKP Turkey and beyond

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Abstract

The built environment is a key arena in which power and ideologies are manifested, negotiated and contested. This was certainly the case in early Republican Turkey with its radically modernist secular architectures and the rationale to create a public space of secular sociabilities. It is no less the case in the "New Turkey" of the Justice and Development Party with its mega-mosques and government buildings in faux "Ottoman - Seljuk" style and the overarching goal of "re-sacralizing" (and hence de-secularizing) the public space. Unlike in the early Republic, however, the boundaries of the imagined "new Turkey" expand well beyond the borders of Turkey proper into the Balkans and to many other world regions, where dozens of mosque projects are under construction that are identical to mosques currently being built in Turkey. In this lecture, I explore the process of how and by whom these mosques are planned and built, and how, in this process, imaginaries of empire are built into the concrete form of new mosques in Turkey and abroad.

Bio

Kerem Öktem is professor of International Relations at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department for Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies. Before his call to Venice, he held the chair of Southeast European Studies and Contemporary Modern Turkey at the University of Graz where he studied and taught the politics and international relations of Turkey and the field of Islam and Muslims in the Balkans. Since his PhD at the University of Oxford in 2006 and his residence as a research fellow at the European Studies Centre at St Antony's College Oxford, Dr. Öktem has published extensively on these and related topics, beginning with Turkey's Engagement with Modernity. Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century (Palgrave Macmillan 2009, with Celia Kerslake and Philip Robbins) and his monograph Angry Nation. Turkey since 1989 (Zed Books, 2011). His more recent volumes examine Turkey's autocratisation under successive Justice and Development Party governments, for instance, Exit from Democracy: Illiberal Governance in Turkey and Beyond (Routledge 2018, with Karabekir Akkoyunlu) and the shrinking space for non-Muslim communities in AKP Turkey in the collection Turkish Jews and Their Diasporas (Palgrave Macmillan 2021 with Ipek Yosmaoğlu). Dr. Öktem is the founding Chair of the Consortium for European Symposia on Turkey (CEST) and alumnus of the Mercator-IPC Fellowship Programme. He serves as an editorial board member of the Journal of Muslims in Europe and the Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies and as a member of the advisory board for the series New directions in Turkish Studies at Berghahn Books.