

Muhammad Iqbal's Views on the Turkish Revolution

Çiğdem ULUTAŞ, Ph.D.

Inönü University, Department of History, Malatya, Turkey

cigdem.kiransan@inonu.edu.tr

Abstract

Muhammad Iqbal was one of the leading Islamic thinkers of the 20th century and an important figure in the struggle for independence in the Indian subcontinent. The proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the subsequent radical reforms not only transformed Turkey internally but also profoundly influenced the political, intellectual, and cultural orientations of the entire Islamic world. In this context, Muhammad Iqbal adopted a unique approach toward the Turkish Revolution, viewing it with both admiration and criticism. Although Muhammad Iqbal's political thought has been extensively studied, his comprehensive interpretation of the Turkish Revolution has received relatively limited scholarly attention. This study employs a qualitative historical research design based on document and textual analysis to address this gap. It argues that Iqbal adopted a balanced approach toward the Turkish Revolution and contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive assessment of his views on Turkish modernization. Iqbal closely followed the Turkish Revolution, particularly in the context of the abolition of the caliphate, the secularization process, and Western-style modernization policies. Iqbal regarded the revolutions led by Atatürk as an important awakening for the Islamic world to discover its own internal dynamism. According to Iqbal, the Turkish people courageously sought ways to stand their ground against the West within their own historical context and, in doing so, presented a new model for independence and progress. However, Iqbal criticized the fact that the reforms were based entirely on a secular foundation and emphasized that Islam's role in building civilization should not be overlooked. In this study, Iqbal's assessments of the Turkish Revolution are interpreted based on primary sources, primarily his poems, articles, and letters. The effects of these views on the Islamic society of the period are examined. Thus, an intellectual perspective is presented in the context of the international reflections of Turkish modernization.

Keywords: Muhammad Iqbal, Turkish Revolution, Turkey, Secularization, Modernization.

Introduction

After the collapse of this empire, the Anatolian Seljuks were also destroyed by the Mongols. Subsequently, many Turkish principalities emerged. The Ottoman Principality, founded by Osman Bey in 1299, grew rapidly and became an empire with the conquest of Istanbul in 1453. The rapidly developing Ottoman Empire provided the Turkish nation with its most advanced period in science,

technology, and culture during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. In the words of Europeans, these centuries were truly Turkish centuries. Nevertheless, this state, one of the largest political entities to emerge in the world, began to stagnate from the early 18th century onwards and then started to decline. This situation could not be stopped despite the efforts of many well-intentioned statesmen, and the failure of the reforms to produce the expected results accelerated the decline considerably by the early 19th century. At that time, the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I would bring the state to the brink of collapse and the nation to the verge of extinction. However, despite everything, the Turkish nation, under the leadership of a genius it produced from within, waged a unique "War of Independence" unparalleled in the history of other nations and which would later serve as an example to many oppressed nations. It succeeded in rebuilding itself into a dynamic society by establishing a brand-new state on the ruins of the old one. Thus, the Turkish Nation demonstrated that it was not merely a nation boasting of being the descendants of a community that had accomplished great deeds in the distant past, but rather that it possessed the ability to add new achievements to those of its ancestors even under the most difficult conditions and that it was determined to advance along the path its ancestors had walked for humanity. It has gone down in world history as the Turkish Revolution (Cöhce, 1992, s. 1).

The Turkish Revolution represents not only a change of regime but also a profound social, cultural, and intellectual transformation. The abolition of the caliphate, the adoption of the principle of secularism, and the fundamental reforms in the education and legal systems have sparked debates and evaluations in various regions of the Islamic world. These revolutions, which are the *raison d'être* of the modern Turkish State and will continue to form the basis of its philosophy of life in the future, have influenced many people in the fields of science, politics, thought, art, etc., both in the past and today. In this context, the thoughts of Allame Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), a leading thinker and poet of the Indian subcontinent, on the Turkish Revolution are extremely important for understanding the spirit of the era and the relationship between the Islamic world and modernization. For this reason, the Turkish Revolution attracted considerable attention not only within Turkey but also among leading intellectuals of the Muslim world, who interpreted its reforms from different political, religious, and intellectual perspectives.

The Turkish Revolution was not merely a national transformation confined to Turkey; it became one of the most influential political and intellectual developments in the modern Muslim world. Its reforms stimulated intense debates among Muslim scholars, politicians, and intellectuals regarding the relationship between Islam, modernity, nationalism, and state-building.

Muhammad Iqbal, the great thinker and poet of the East, devoted his efforts to the reawakening and revival of the Islamic world during one of the worst periods in its history. Through his poems and writings, he addressed all humanity, and Muslims in particular, warning them that to free themselves from bondage, they must first develop their own identities. Muhammad Iqbal, one of Pakistan's most important poets, laid the foundations for his country's independence. Muhammad Iqbal was a poet and thinker who served not only Pakistan but all Muslims. He continued to write poems to support the revival of Islam and the efforts of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent to gain their rights. (Iqbal, 1981, p. 16; Iqbal, 2002; Iqbal, 2010, p. 15).

Iqbal was a poet, philosopher, social commentator, and part-time politician who wrote on a wide range of subjects, from intellectual history and economics to science, philosophy of religion, and public policy. Iqbal is regarded not only as a poet but also as a thinker and political visionary who sought solutions to the crises facing the Islamic world in the modern era. Born on November 9, 1877, in Sialkot, Punjab Province, Pakistan, Iqbal came from a middle-class Muslim family (Iqbal, 1981, p. 16; Iqbal, 2010, p. 15). His commitment to the spiritual values he inherited from his family was strengthened by Mevlevi Mir Hasan (Iqbal, 2002, p. 13; Iqbal, 2010, p. 16), a local educator known for his extensive knowledge and piety (Akbaş, 2013, p. 45). Encouraged by his teacher, he enrolled at Scotch Mission School, which provided education in English. In 1899, he was appointed as an Arabic teaching assistant at Orient College, while also teaching English and philosophy during the same period. He began to gain recognition for his Urdu poetry (Vahid, 2015, p.15). At this time, he also began studying law and, at the insistence of Prof. Dr. Thomas Arnold, began his European education in 1905 at Trinity College, affiliated with Cambridge University in England (Begum, 1947, p.9), where he studied law and philosophy between 1905 and 1907. During this period, he also visited Italy, Spain, and several other European countries. These trips allowed him to see colonialism and the conditions of oppressed countries firsthand. After completing his doctorate at the University of Munich in 1907, he returned to his country a year later (Iqbal, 2013, p. 13).

Thanks to his education in the West and his deep connection with the spiritual world of the East, he developed a unique intellectual perspective that blends both Islamic traditions and modern philosophy. He acquired the scientific structure and research spirit of the West from his teacher Prof. Dr. Thomas Arnold (Schimmel, 1990, p.7), and shaped his own identity by blending these with the Islamic knowledge and faith he acquired from Mevlâna Mir Hasan (Iqbal, 2010, p. 16). On the one hand, his knowledge of Arabic and Persian, acquired from Mir Hasan, enabled him to read and understand the works of the most distinguished Islamic writers.

On the other hand, his education in the West and his Western upbringing did not distance him from his country and society but rather strengthened his feelings (Iqbal, 2010, p. 15).

Iqbal is one of the thinkers who is most knowledgeable about Europe's developments in science and technology, its standard of living, the suitability of its living conditions, and the effectiveness of its educational institutions. At the same time, he is one of the foremost advocates and supporters of progress in these areas reaching a high level in Eastern societies as well. Drawing the source of his thought from Islam, particularly from Sufism's understanding of divine love and the teaching of the perfect human being, Iqbal aimed to give a positive meaning to the human self. His thought aims to guide the individual to consciously seek truth, instill in people the self-confidence to change the course of history, and impart an ideal of life based on spirituality and morality (Karahana, 1974, p.11).

Iqbal's intellectual universe is based on an approach that questions the reasons for the backwardness of Islamic societies, encourages social awakening, and emphasizes individual responsibility. Iqbal's understanding of modernization is based on the desire to assimilate the scientific and institutional achievements of the West, rather than imitating the West, and to integrate them with the universal values of Islam. In this respect, he differs from both traditional conservatism and Western-oriented secular modernity. According to him, Islamic civilization should neither remain stuck in the past nor be sacrificed to a formless modernity. On the contrary, a new intellectual and political order based on a balance between reason and faith should be constructed. In this respect, the reforms undertaken by the Turkish nation towards modernization caught Iqbal's attention and sparked important debates in the world of thought.

In his work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal states, "If the renaissance of Islam is a fact, and I believe it is a fact, we too one day, like the Turks, will have to re-evaluate our intellectual inheritance. And if we cannot make any original contribution to the general thought of Islam, we may, by healthy conservative criticism, serve at least as a check on the rapid movement of liberalism in the world of Islam." (Iqbal 2013, p.121). He uses the Turkish experience to illustrate the process of intellectual awakening in the Islamic world. The Turks' reinterpretation of their own cultural and intellectual heritage during their modernization process serves as a model for other Muslim societies. Iqbal emphasized that this process of re-evaluation is inevitable and that even when original contributions cannot be made, conservative criticism can be functional in balancing the liberal tendencies shaping Islamic thought.

The abolition of the caliphate caused widespread repercussions in India and led to serious reactions. This decision was seen by a large segment of society as a step contrary to Islam. However, there were also those who viewed these developments in Turkey as progressive, courageous, and an innovation in line with the spirit of Islam. For example, Iqbal interpreted this process as the product of *ijtihad* and approved the decision. According to Iqbal, the Ottoman caliphate had long been merely a symbol. Universal caliphate was an idea that was only valid when Islam was strong (Özcan, 1997, p. 249). Regarding the abolition of the Caliphate, Iqbal wrote in his work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*: “According to Sunni Law, the appointment of an Imam or Khalifah is absolutely indispensable. The first question that arises in this connection is this: Should the Caliphate be vested in a single person? Turkey’s *Ijtihad* is that, according to the spirit of Islam, the Caliphate or Imamate can be vested in a body of persons or an elected Assembly. The religious doctors of Islam in Egypt and India, as far as I know, have not yet expressed themselves on this point. Personally, I believe the Turkish view is perfectly sound. It is hardly necessary to argue this point. The republican form of government is not only thoroughly consistent with the spirit of Islam, but has also become a necessity in view of the new forces that are set free in the world of Islam.” (Iqbal, 2013, p.123). In other words, while the necessity of appointing a caliph is accepted in Islamic law, this responsibility can also be assumed by an assembly, as was done by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (Maruf, 1977, p. 81). According to Iqbal, the republican form of government is not only entirely consistent with the spirit of Islam, but has also become a necessity in view of the new forces that have been unleashed in the Islamic world. The Turkish revolutions reflect the model of modern political thought in the Islamic world.

While Iqbal considered it legitimate for the Turkish Grand National Assembly to abolish the caliphate in a legally valid manner through the common will of the Turkish people, he regarded the concept of secularism and the complete separation of religion from politics as an attitude incompatible with the essence of Islam. Iqbal clearly regarded the issues of the caliphate and Pan-Islamism as two separate and independent issues. In his view, the caliphate had now withdrawn from the stage of history, but this did not mean that it had become completely defunct. According to Iqbal, the caliphate was not only a historical institution but also a symbol representing the spiritual unity of the Islamic ummah. However, the conditions of the modern era had made it impossible for this institution to continue to exist in its traditional form. Therefore, the idea of the caliphate would necessarily retain its validity but would

continue to exist within the collective consciousness and spirit of solidarity of Islamic society, albeit in a transformed form. According to Iqbal, conceptualizations such as “Turkish, Persian, Arab, or Hindu Islam” are completely contrary to the universal spirit of Islam. This is because Islam is an inclusive belief system that cannot be reduced to a specific tribe, language, or culture. At its core lies a moral and metaphysical consciousness directed toward the common destiny of humanity. For this reason, Iqbal criticized interpretations of Islam that are confined to the narrow nationalist patterns of modern political understanding. According to him, Islam could thrive within a multi-ethnic, free union such as the Islamic Union of Nations. Within this concept of a new, multi-ethnic Pan-Islamism, Iqbal developed a theory for Pakistan (Ahmed, 1990, p. 169; Iqbal, 1964, p. 17). Advancing the idea of a “separate homeland for Muslims,” he argued for the establishment of an independent Muslim state in the Muslim-majority regions of India. These ideas formed the basis of the Pakistan movement and ultimately the establishment of the State of Pakistan. Iqbal was one of the first thinkers and leaders to go beyond vague suggestions and explicitly state the necessity of establishing a separate state for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. His vision initiated the process that led to the creation of Pakistan and the formation of an independent homeland for Muslims. Iqbal’s vision provided effective guidance during the process of partitioning the Indian subcontinent and establishing Pakistan (Dani, 1998, p. 207; Gupta, 1970, p. 167; Iqbal, 2005, p. 112).

The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam in his study titled “The truth is that among the Muslim nations of today, Turkey alone has shaken off its dogmatic slumber, and attained to self-consciousness. She alone has claimed her right of intellectual freedom; she alone has passed from the ideal to the real a transition which entails keen intellectual and moral struggle.” (Iqbal, 2013, p.128). “Such is the lot of most Muslim countries today. They are mechanically repeating old values, whereas the Turk is on the way to creating new values. He has passed through great experiences which have revealed his deeper self to him. In him life has begun to move, change, and amplify, giving birth to new desires, bringing new difficulties and suggesting new interpretations.” These statements suggest that the major political, social, and cultural transformations experienced by Turks in their recent history have fostered a deeper sense of identity among them, highlighting a dynamic and innovative aspect of Turkey that distinguishes it from other Muslim societies (Iqbal, 2013, p.128).

Iqbal, as a thinker well-versed in both Islamic culture and Western civilization, aimed to revive the dynamism of Islam by preserving the spirituality and virtue of the East while benefiting from the scientific and technical advances of the West. His goal was to foster the

development of a conscious, progressive society committed to spiritual values without compromising faith and morality (Karahana, 1974, p.11). Iqbal asserts that alterations in social situations, along with the evolving needs and interests of individuals, particularly children, and the progression of knowledge necessitate a perpetual reevaluation of curriculum selection. The curriculum's content and materials should be perpetually modified, updated, and restructured (Tufail, 1966, p.112).

Iqbal criticized the Turkish Alphabet Reform and the clothing revolution. He stated that if innovation is necessary, it should be done by looking to the Quran, not by imitation. According to him, the East should criticize the West, not imitate it. He criticized the alphabet reform and the clothing revolution, saying that the power of the West comes from science and technology, not the Latin alphabet, and that science and art cannot be hindered by turbans (Gürer & Uyanık, 2019, p. 66). At the same time, he expressed his criticism of the Quran being read in Turkish as "Personally I regard it as a serious error of judgement." (Ahmad, 1960, p. 90).

Regarding the Civil Code and the Commercial and Penal Codes, Muhammad Iqbal evaluated Mustafa Kemal's actions within the framework of customary law, one of the sources of Islamic law. He saw Mustafa Kemal as the commander of an Islamic state and his reforms as the right to use the customary powers granted by Islamic law to the commander of an Islamic state. According to him, Islamic law grants the ruler of an Islamic state the authority to abolish things permitted by Sharia if he is convinced that they tend to lead to social decay. He expressed his opinion on the closure of madrasas and the abolition of the ulema's authority quite clearly with the words, "If I had the power, I would definitely do this in Muslim India. The existence of mullahs who invent superstitions stems from the stupidity of the average Muslim." (Gürer & Uyanık, 2019, p. 66).

Iqbal appreciated that *ijtihad*, "enhanced and expanded by modern philosophical ideas, has long been influential in the religious and political thought of the Turkish nation." According to him, if the revival of Islam is to take place, "we too will one day have to reevaluate our intellectual heritage, just like the Turks." (Hassan 1979, p.25). Iqbal has been in favor of change without shedding tears within the framework of the existing social order. According to him, "Islam believes in the efficiency of well-directed action based on man's use of his senses and reason. Hence the standpoint of Islam is the ultimate supposition of all human effort at scientific discovery and social progress." (Tufail, 1966, p.81). Consequently, the moral and

religious ideal of humanity is not self-denial, but self-affirmation, achieved through the process of becoming increasingly independent and distinctive. Iqbal called for changing and improving the existing conditions, but in doing so, he also opposed imitating the West as it was (Tufail, 1966, p.81).

Turkey is the first Islamic country that managed to both liberate itself from enemy occupation and defeat the opposing forces, while also breaking free from the influence of medieval thought and traditions and turning towards a modern and contemporary way of life. Iqbal saw the Turkish nation's success in reviving the dynamism, energy, will to victory, and desire for progress hidden in the noble spirit of Islam as an exemplary development. He considered this situation a promising step in terms of the revival and awareness of the Islamic world. In later years, Iqbal criticized certain aspects of Turkey's unique new lifestyle, sensing a tendency to imitate the West and a superficial pretentiousness in some modernization steps. Although he came to believe that some revolutions had led to the glorious past of the Turks and Islam being forgotten, he never relinquished his deep love and respect for the Turkish nation and Turkey (Karahana, 1974, p.23). Influenced by this love, a significant number of Muslims came from Pakistan to fight in the ranks of the Turkish army in Anatolia (Iqbal, 2010, p.17).

In his assessment of the reforms in Turkey, Muhammad Iqbal stated: "The truth is that, among today's Muslim nations, only Turkey has shaken off its dogmatic slumber and gained self-awareness. Only Turkey has claimed the right to intellectual freedom; only Turkey has moved from the ideal to the real." (Iqbal, 2013, p.128).

Although Muhammad Iqbal's political thought and his ideas on Islam and modernity have attracted considerable scholarly attention, his comprehensive evaluation of the Turkish Revolution has not been examined in a systematic manner. Existing studies primarily focus on individual reforms, particularly the abolition of the caliphate, while paying relatively limited attention to Iqbal's broader interpretation of Turkish modernization as an intellectual, political, and civilizational transformation. This gap constitutes the central research problem addressed in this article. Therefore, the present study aims to examine Iqbal's views on the Turkish Revolution through a close analysis of his major writings, poems, speeches, and letters. It seeks to answer two main research questions: (1) How did Iqbal interpret the Turkish Revolution within the framework of Islamic thought? (2) Which aspects of the Turkish reforms did he support and which did he criticize? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the

existing scholarship by providing a more comprehensive understanding of Iqbal's intellectual engagement with Turkish modernization and its significance for modern Islamic political thought.

Among the numerous Muslim intellectuals who commented on the Turkish Revolution, Muhammad Iqbal occupies a distinctive position. Unlike many contemporary observers who either uncritically praised or categorically rejected the Turkish reforms, Iqbal adopted a balanced and intellectually nuanced approach. He regarded the Turkish experience as an important manifestation of renewal and *ijtihad*, while simultaneously questioning reforms that, in his view, weakened the spiritual foundations of Islamic civilization. This balanced perspective makes his views particularly significant for understanding the intellectual reception of the Turkish Revolution in the Muslim world.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical research design based on document and textual analysis. The primary objective is to examine Muhammad Iqbal's interpretation of the Turkish Revolution through a close reading of his major intellectual works and other relevant writings. The analysis primarily relies on Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, together with his poems, speeches, letters, and selected essays in which he discusses the Turkish Revolution, Islamic reform, and modernization.

In addition to primary sources, the study draws upon a wide range of secondary literature on Muhammad Iqbal, the Turkish Revolution, modern Islamic thought, and Turkish modernization. These sources are used to contextualize Iqbal's ideas, compare different scholarly interpretations, and evaluate his intellectual position within the broader debates on Islam and modernity.

The research adopts an interpretive historical approach, focusing on the relationship between Iqbal's original statements and the political and intellectual developments of the period. Rather than providing a chronological narrative of the Turkish Revolution, the study analyzes how Iqbal interpreted its major reforms, particularly in relation to *ijtihad*, the abolition of the caliphate, secularization, and modernization. By combining primary texts with relevant scholarly literature, the article aims to present a balanced and comprehensive assessment of Iqbal's views on the Turkish Revolution.

By examining Iqbal's views through both primary sources and relevant scholarly literature, this study contributes to the existing literature by presenting a comprehensive assessment of his interpretation of the Turkish Revolution within the broader context of modern Islamic thought.

Conclusion

Muhammad Iqbal not only wholeheartedly shared his deep and warm affection for the Turkish nation, but as a poet and thinker, he also conveyed his sorrows and joys to his nation and the world with his unique power of expression. Iqbal's intellectual universe is based on an approach that questions the reasons for the backwardness of Islamic societies, encourages social awakening, and emphasizes individual responsibility. Iqbal's understanding of modernization is based on the desire to assimilate the scientific and institutional achievements of the West, rather than imitating it, and to integrate them with the universal values of Islam. In this respect, he differs from both traditional conservatism and Western-oriented secular modernity. According to him, Islamic civilization should neither remain in the past nor be sacrificed to a formless modernity. On the contrary, a new intellectual and political order based on the balance of reason and faith should be constructed.

Muhammad Iqbal regarded the Turkish Revolution not only as a political transformation but also as a historical turning point in terms of the intellectual awakening of the Islamic world. He believed that the reforms in Turkey were the most concrete manifestation of Muslim societies' will to redefine their own destinies. Iqbal deeply admired the Turkish nation's entry into a process of modernization based on its own historical and cultural foundations, without blindly imitating the West. However, he critically interpreted some radical steps, such as the alphabet reform, the change in dress, and the reading of the Quran in Turkish, emphasizing that the role of religion in social unity and spiritual guidance should not be completely excluded.

According to Iqbal, the Turkish Revolution carries two important messages for the future of the Muslim world: First, that Islam can guide the contemporary world through the revival of free thought and the spirit of *ijtihad*; second, that political independence can only be meaningful with intellectual independence. In this regard, he saw the Turkish experience not as a model to be imitated, but as a source of inspiration for revival. Although he spoke highly of the revolutions in Turkey, he also directed some criticism in later periods.

Ultimately, Muhammad Iqbal's view of the Turkish Revolution was neither unconditional praise nor harsh criticism. He evaluated Turkey's modernization efforts in the context of the renewal of Islamic thought. He interpreted the Turkish nation's bold initiative as a call for the Islamic world to discover its own internal dynamism. In this respect, Iqbal's thoughts deeply reflect both the intellectual echoes of Turkish modernization and the hopes and concerns about the future of Muslim societies.

Muhammad Iqbal's understanding of modernization is broadly shaped by the idea that Muslims must become part of the modern world without losing their identity. According to him, reason, which is the principle of life for Westerners, can create perfect harmony when combined with love, which is the secret of the universe for Easterners. Muslims should synthesize their future with their own values rather than building it solely on Western values. This is because both the West's secular development independent of religion and the East's pure religiosity are deceptive. The East should benefit from Western science and technology to find solutions to its problems. However, this should not be the ultimate goal. Science needs to be grounded in religion, and religion needs to be grounded in rational foundations.

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