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Polarization in a Culturally Changing Society

*Nora Seni*¹

Abstract

Is Turkey switching sides and abandoning the Western world for the Arab-Islamic world? To address this question, this paper moves from analyzing the way of life and the cultural consumption of Islamic conservatives and of the secular lower and upper-middle classes to evaluate the chances Turkish society has of overcoming their differences. It will focus on the role of the government and prime minister in polarizing these two sides of society.

For the last two years, after Turkey reelected “conservative Muslims” to government positions for a third time, the international press has sought to determine if the country is realigning itself, if the axis of its alliances has been slipping eastward, toward the Arab-Islamic world. Undeniably, this question must be answered by examining international relations. Nonetheless, it is also true that the results of any such research will inevitably be short-lived and at the mercy of new foreign policy measures adopted as a result of extreme regional instability. To move forward, the thinking has to evaluate the propensity of society as a whole to allow—even advance with—such changes. For this, it is necessary to identify societal changes in attitudes and customs. We will be therefore addressing these issues from the standpoint of lifestyles and cultural behaviors. Why take this approach? Because analyses based on social class are less pertinent in this case due to the sub-divisions within both the middle class and the bourgeoisie. To the social division in terms of income class or level of education, one must add the degree of adhesion to Islam and its customs. This stratification structures the political landscape. The former paradigms

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associating poverty, ignorance and religiosity, on the one hand, and wealth and universalist/secular culture, on the other hand, are no longer relevant.

This paper will begin with three separate observations and one question. The first observation relates to the emergence of a new, Islamo-conservative, middle class. The second notes that only an exceedingly small portion of the great Islamic families mimic the cultural customs of the secular elite. The third reveals the duality—if not apartheid—that in Turkish society affects cultural consumption, and its actors, reasoning, and places. The question this raises concerns knowing in which direction the balance tilts between promoting convergence and accentuating polarization. The term “polarization” is preferred here over the notion of “rifts” and “divisions” (which focus more on what separates), because it evokes both the process of separation and the nature, the very texture, of what has created the new entity once it is separated.

A New Middle Class

The new middle class that has emerged in Turkey has been the principal electorate of the governing party for 10 years, the Justice and Development Party (JDP)²—described by the Western world as “moderate Islamic.” By wearing the headscarf—a social marker—and by tying it in a certain way, women in this social category provide their family and social circle with the assurance necessary to be counted among those supporting the government. This middle class has prospered. Aspects of its lifestyle and consumption patterns today are closer to the forms adopted by the portion of the electorate who do not display the symbols of their religious convictions, who emerged during the first decades of the Turkish Republic and from the post-WWII economic boom. Turbaned young women (wearing a scarf covering both the hair and neck), in jeans and sneakers, pursue advanced studies, have professional aspirations, and drive cars. The couples they form with young men in tee-shirts stroll through IKEA’s showrooms in search of the same furnishings as their peers. Thus the paradigm associating poverty, ignorance, and religion in Turkey has seen its day. Today, there is a *second* middle class.

A New Bourgeoisie

A new bourgeoisie, Islamo-conservative, has also prospered, among whom only the elite adopt ostentatious practices similar to those of important families who

2. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) in Turkish.

collect paintings and *objets d'art*.³ However, this upper level of those close to the JDP still only account for a tenth of the people bearing the 500 last names who pay the highest government taxes. The others, businessmen labeled by the media as the “Anatolian Tigers,” exhibit the Islamo-conservative lifestyle in which abstinence from alcohol, their wives’ headscarves, and a small mustache like that of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (RTE), are recognized in a way that bestows favor when government contracts are awarded. Moreover, Muslim and secular employers each have their own union. In some new districts of Istanbul, lifestyle and peer relationships involve self-segregation (or chosen segregation). Islamic gated communities have in their own way imitated the lifestyle of the protected districts of the secular bourgeoisie. Apart from this similarity, convergence between the two is rare, and it seems that this will continue as long as the “modesty” of the Islamo-conservative bourgeois lifestyle attracts preferential treatment from the government. Although the gated housing developments look alike, in no districts of Istanbul does this group present the ostentatious, ritualistic displays that have gone on for years in the chic districts of northern Istanbul, where the secular bourgeoisie goes to see and be seen in stores selling major brand-name products, and in stylish cafés and restaurants. Fashion is a field in which differences should be tracked. One thing is certain: standards and trends first take shape on a secular level previously associated with Europe, and then spread to and are perceived by the Islamo-conservative bourgeoisie, whose choice of clothing, in particular with respect to lines and coloring, has changed considerably over the last 10 years.

The Duality of Cultural Production and Consumption

Since the 1990s, the structure of cultural production and consumption has been significantly altered. This is particularly so in Istanbul, where supply has been considerably enriched, professionalized, diversified, and “globalized.” Cultural production in the former Ottoman capital is defined by a sharp duality between private foundations as major players and public authorities.

3. The identity of the person who, at the Istanbul auction in 2009, purchased Dogancay’s painting *Bleu* (the most expensive contemporary Turkish work to date), remained hidden for several days, thereby arousing media curiosity. In speculation in the press at the time, there was no mention of any conservative industrialist being the buyer. It was then discovered that the Üker family had created the event, a chocolate manufacturer, who had dominated the food industry since the 1960s, known to be religiously conservative. This was news! The public was aware of the artistic and cultural involvement of the leading secular families—Koc, Sabancı, and Eczacıbaşı—and their collections and museums, but apparently did not imagine that a conservative businessman would be purchasing art on a global market and collecting it.

The private institutions and foundations deriving from the major industrial families that emerged after World War II organize events, festivals and international art-related meetings, celebrating the various seasons of Istanbul (Seni 2010 and 2009a). The Biennial of Contemporary Istanbul Art, the International Music Festival (since 1973), the International Film Festival (since 1989), the International Jazz Festival, Rock 'n Coke and, most recently, the Design Biennial (2012) are regular international events in which not only various members of the elite and select fans participate, but also a very extensive general public. To this one might add the creation by these families of some 10 museums of modern art in Istanbul. Art galleries and cultural centers owned by private foundations are found not only on İstikâl Street but also in the Beyoğlu (former Pera) and Galata districts (Seni 2009a).

Although there are no surveys to prove this, these events, which are very much in keeping with the increased importance of cultural *event-planning* in Europe,⁴ do not really find favor with conservative Muslims. FEW headscarves are seen at music festivals, the Biennial, or art galleries where there are only rare displays of the outward symbols of religious belief.

Cultural institutions that fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, municipalities (metropolitan and district), and religiously-based associations and foundations, develop pedagogical/ideological programs. These public institutions maintain international ties, while giving preference to the Turkish and Muslim world. Art and culture are instrumental here, less for promoting individual self-fulfillment than for developing the sense of a community that has been duly reinterpreted to exalt the Ottoman past and religious precepts;⁵ minimizing the republican rift and the “Westernizing” and firmly voluntarist reforms⁶ of the Republic. The single museum in Istanbul established by public authorities (whereas, private foundations created 10 of them in the 2000s decade) is the Museum of Conquest (*Fetih müzesi*), in reference to the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans.⁷ The museum’s design conveys the

4. For further details on urban cultural event planning, see (Vauclare 2009 and Gravari-Barbas and Jacquot 2007).

5. Traditional arts are promoted, in particular involving women, who are offered the possibility of taking workshops in calligraphy (*hat*), marbling (*ebru*), illumination (*tezhib*), and religious music (a groups of female whirling dervishes was even established in Bursa).

6. This voluntarism is often discounted by political scientists on both sides as being a part of “social engineering.”

7. The Museum of Conquest was built on the border of the historic peninsula, abutting the Theodosian walls in the part of the city where the conservative middle class is more prominent than in the sectors to the north. Designed with museological standards in mind, rather than more obsolete ones, the museum’s permanent exhibition sends three primary messages: the Ottomans were powerful; capturing Constantinople was a commandment of the Koran; and the Ottomans were tolerant. Displayed in this collection are period paintings showing Mehmet the Conqueror

rewriting of Ottoman history by the public authorities within the historical continuum in which they find themselves. This new weighting of historical events resulted in a transformation of the calendar of national holidays, a change in rituals and in the importance of celebrations inherited from the Kemalist project.⁸

It seems obvious that this museum does not address the entire population of Istanbul, but is instead aimed at Islamo-conservatives. Compared with the withdrawal of commitment to cultural activities by the public authorities, as recently illustrated by the 2012 crisis of (secular) municipal theaters,⁹ the design of the Museum of Conquest illustrates the way in which the JDP operates in order to maintain the divisions, which in this case are cultural.

Convergence or Polarization?

Thus two separate universes exist in contemporary Turkey, each with its own values, vision, depictions and realm of imagination. Public cultural supply comes in a variety of religious and national forms, which integrates it into the continuity of Ottoman history revisited, thereby minimizing the republican split as much as possible. By contrast, the private cultural supply is made up of influential family foundations, the most important of these—The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV)—functions as a veritable Ministry of Culture and contributes to making Istanbul an international cultural center. The vitality of this field is nourished by the networks, the cultural production and consumption standards of a globalized world.

granting Christians and Jews in the city the right to practice their religion. At the high point of this exhibit, visitors find themselves surrounded by large rifles and Janissairies, in a 360-degree view representing the walls of the city and by background noise of clashing swords.

8. In 2012, the “youth and sports festival” celebrating the start of the “war of independence” in 1919 was abandoned. Admittedly, this type of parade was dated and its style evoked unpleasant memories. The fact remains that this decision followed those which, for different reasons and to varying degrees, affected the National Holiday of the Republic (October 29), and the commemoration of Atatürk’s death (November 10), both of which were symbolic moments for the Republic. Celebrated as national holidays, religious feasts have gained importance and visibility, in particular in Istanbul and during the month of Ramadan, when large tables, which break the fast, are set in public places under municipal authority. In August 2011, this same municipal authority (after the elections) chose the month of Ramadan to control the area housing the neighborhood bistros of Beyoglu, which ignored fasting, by eliminating outside dining tables.

9. Once the municipality had amended the statutes of municipal theaters so as to choose the plays to be performed, a strike broke out and was publicized by the press. The government, through the prime minister, made it known that it preferred that the theater be privatized and thereby free from the trusteeship of public authorities.

This divide between two cultures cannot be understood in terms of social class—those who use contemporary event-planning are not necessarily social elites—or in terms of high culture versus popular culture. This involves selected and separate *habitus*, which are controlled by values and tastes derived from a specific cultural capital which, on the one hand, is renewed and maintained by the discourse and measures of the government and Islamic conservative municipalities and, on the other, by private actors organized into foundations whose activities fall within international competition among global metropolises.

Although foreign to one another, these two universes interact; they are porous and permeable. Systems of thinking, styles, aesthetic standards, and behaviors spread from one to the other, drawing lines of convergence. Television, the greatest homogenizer of all time, has contributed to this. Conservatives and modernists, Muslims, and agnostics have sat down together in front of their television sets for more than 10 years as captive viewers of series “made in Turkey.” As a charming asset of the Turkish “soft policy,” exports are growing exponentially to Arab countries, Greece, and Bulgaria (see the paper by Julien Paris). The temptation is strong to consider this phenomenon of society as an element of “natural” convergence between the various lifestyles that make up contemporary Turkey.

In fact, the issue to be considered here is whether the lines of convergence between various lifestyles will dominate—cultural consumption being only one component—or if polarization will win out to the detriment of all.

Istanbul: A Stage and Object of Confrontation between Lifestyles

The former Ottoman capital is both a theater stage on which two separate lifestyles perform, scrutinize each other, and compete, and a territory coveted by the Islamic Conservative Party and business world, which in turn is split between laymen and Islamo-conservatives (represented by two different unions). The city offers an exceptional ground for JDP clientelism, and is also a source of land rent, the extraction of which promises to accelerate, via the so-called “crazy projects”¹⁰ of the JDP countless demolitions/reconstructions anticipated to secure the structure against earthquake risks. It is also a window displaying a new map of the regime’s memory and identity.

10. Digging a canal connecting the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea to enable passage of a portion of the traffic from the Bosphorus, and the creation of two new cities north of Istanbul, are colossal projects for Istanbul. The construction of the third bridge north of Istanbul, while not crazy, is also a major project that began in 2012.

Istanbul, the Stage

Separate lifestyles thus stand side-by-side in Istanbul. They imitate, exclude, and envy one another; they isolate from one another, become ghettoized; they intermingle. We are familiar with the gated communities of the bourgeoisie in and around Istanbul. Less known are the neighborhoods built after 1994, where exclusively Muslim self-segregation has been tested out, a middle-class suburban lifestyle set in a landscape that evokes the kind of housing and housing blocks that have been held responsible for dehumanizing day-to-day working lives, especially in France. Except for location, the majority of residents own their own homes. The Basaksehir district is the symbolic laboratory for this lifestyle (Cavdar 2012).¹¹ It lies more than 20 kilometers from the center of Istanbul, on the European side and to the west of the city, served by the highway to Edirne. Its emergence and growth as a new district go hand-in-hand with the development of the conservative Muslim middle class. In 1994, when the Islamist Refah Party (from which the current JDP government party derived) won the local elections and took over the municipality of Istanbul, it activated KIPTAS (an instrument for financing urban development projects, established in 1980), by entrusting it with the mission of selling municipal property for its land income. TOKI (the housing development administration of Turkey) and KIPTAS joined forces to cover Turkish territory, and in particular Istanbul, with large housing projects. The policy of making affordable, low-income housing resulted in a pro-JDP, middle-class electorate. TOKI became a preferred tool of government urban clientelism. Its president was appointed by the prime minister. Besides, after the 2011 elections, the former president of TOKI was also appointed as the Minister of Housing.

From 1995 to the present, Basaksehir was built in several stages, and its population grew as a result of a co-op system and random drawings that would ensure the religious and “religiously observant” homogeneity of the location. Although they were not initially designed as gated communities, the neighborhoods and districts were gradually surrounded by walls, with entrances monitored by guards. It is

11. The author would like to thank Ms. Cavdar, whose (ongoing) thesis on Basaksehir relies on the surveys she conducted while choosing to live in this district for six months, blending in with the population, in particular by covering herself like the local residents; and who responded to the invitation to share her preliminary results with researchers and partners of the French Institute for Anatolian Studies, which I directed during the conference, “Loss of Modesty, the Adventure of a Muslim Family: From Mahalle to Gated Communities,” June 19, 2012, at the institute; video: http://www.ifea-istanbul.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1560:ay%C5%9Fe-%C3%A7avdar-loss-of-modesty-the-adventure-of-muslim-family-from-mahalle-to-gated-communities-19-06-2012&Itemid=315&lang=fr.

conceivable that this self-segregation developed as the feeling of being privileged took hold. It then became important to develop a lifestyle that had no reason to envy the secular bourgeoisie neighborhoods to the far northwest of Istanbul.¹² Today, Basaksehir is a constellation of districts with close to a million residents. The social stratification has become visible, and can be identified by symbols related to clothing and customs.¹³ As an example of the JDP upwardly mobile social arena, Basaksehir was the laboratory where the *modus operandi* of manufacture and promotion of the new middle class was designed.

Nevertheless, we cannot be certain that upward mobility and living conditions have met the needs of the residents of Basaksehir. The inconvenience of being distant from the center of Istanbul and the weakening of social ties and sociability primarily affected women. The “modernity” offered by this new framework scarcely favored neighborhood-based relationships such as those maintained in the *gecekondu* (shanty) neighborhoods,¹⁴ the spontaneous habitat where, just as in the Anatolian villages, women went through their neighbors’ revolving doors without having to knock. In this environment, where private and collective spheres are not drastically separated from one another, women could still go away and leave their children to play outside while entrusting their neighbors to watch over them on a free-floating basis. Relationships are much more formal in Basaksehir, more so too than in the small towns of the Anatolian provinces where housewives meet in the afternoons around a cup of tea. These behaviors are disappearing in this new setting, and religious practices do not appear to create new social networks for women.¹⁵ The attractiveness of Basaksehir to the conservative Muslim middle class is thus decreasing. This is expressed at times in the desire to leave this place in order to fulfill new aspirations, although it is too early to tell whether the desire for a less ghetto-like environment figures in this. Nevertheless, it can be said that real estate developers, sensitive to this new direction, are giving new housing sites (and as

12. Religious homogeneity is not an integral part of Basaksehir. Lodgings are occupied by hostesses who work at the Atatürk Airport of Istanbul, a few blocks away from the district. Some two hundred families of retired army officers occupy the Oyakkent district, who settled there after the so-called February 1997 military coup d’état. The claimed to feel besieged.

13. Cavdar (“False Modernity”) was able to discern the social landscape of Basaksehir by the chromatic color choices in women’s clothing; gentrification is embodied in monochromatic headscarves whereas more modest individuals opt for multi-colored ones. “How does one distinguish them? The poor always dress colorfully. The privileged ones from Basaksehir, who know how to consume and dress cover themselves in brown, grey and black.”

14. A term that literally means “positioned in the night” and which designates both the illegal sector and urban poverty.

15. Ayse Cavdar claims that the use of Prozac has become common among the women of Basaksehir and that women who have lived for a long time in this suburb want only to leave it.

a marketing line) the names of the old favored districts of Istanbul situated in the most beautiful locations of the city, generally on the banks of the Bosphorus. It is not so much economic inaccessibility that attracts Muslim conservatives to these Disneyland replica areas, as the desire to belong to the history of Istanbul and its *savoir-vivre*, from which they feel separated, and not only because they do not consume alcohol.

The spread of rites of consumption is another powerful agent for convergence between lifestyles. The prosperity of the Turkish economy was accompanied by the Americanization of consumption patterns. Turkey, and Istanbul in particular, were updated by means of large commercial centers, i.e., shopping malls. Bahçeşehir alone is home to more than 30 department stores and shopping centers, which also function as meeting places populated by women and men complying with the established codes of Bahçeşehir. However, in order to purchase electronics or indoor furniture, conservative and secular men and women alike find themselves in the big box retail stores like IKEA or Carrefour.

From these examples, it is fair to say that the homogeneity of the ghettos on each end of the spectrum will give way to common practices, under pressure of economic reasoning and mimetic behavior. The ostentatious signs of social status are already becoming more important than religious symbols expressed in styles of clothing. The headscarf, turban, and styles of dress are increasingly less important as nodes that crystallize the confrontation between lifestyles. Radicalization tends to stem more from the highest levels of the state. The residential districts and protected cities are not the source of long-term polarizing effects; rather, the clash of lifestyles is becoming radicalized, paradoxically, in the culturally mixed and formerly cosmopolitan leisure centers. The principal stimulus for polarization comes from the public authorities, municipalities, and the central power embodied in the prime minister.

Istanbul, an Object of Desire

Istanbul has been home simultaneously to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim populations for centuries, not as a form of togetherness idealized by a propagandist's rewriting of recent history, but rather through organization into *mahalles* (community districts). What remains of this heritage in an environment where 99 percent of the population is Muslim? As it happens, the districts retain the memory of this plurality in their buildings and architecture. This is the case in Beyoğlu (the former Péra) and Galata where, prior to the Republic, there was a concentration of foreign representatives and embassies, today the headquarters of consulates and other cultural bodies. After having been a window onto Europe throughout the nineteenth century, from which influences and fashions spread, the attractiveness of Beyoğlu

declined in the wake of the pogrom of September 1955, which destroyed non-Muslim stores and shops. Though they were rather neglected districts, Beyoglu and Galata returned to the center of cultural life at the end of the 1980s. Architectural heritage sites were classified, new museums and galleries were established, and yuppies, artists, and intellectuals chose to make the district their home. The district swapped its Viennese pastry shops of the 1930s and 1940s for Parisian-style cafés—the *meyhane* (bars/brasseries), which trace their roots back to the convivial gatherings of the Ottomans; where men would meet and relax after work, tasting aperitifs spiked with raki like the Japanese drinking sake before going home. These bistros have multiplied, and their clientele today number as many women as men. Young people gather there, with fewer yuppies but no “covered” women. The question is whether these customs, which add to the vitality of Beyoglu and the adjacent districts of Galata and Chiangir, toward which a large number of people converge, will succumb to the limitations imposed since 2011 by district municipal authorities on the cafés and brasseries of the area. After the 2011 elections, when the mayor of Beyoglu prohibited cafés and bistros from extending outward onto the sidewalks, thereby drastically reducing the number of clients and running the risk of irritating patrons and local small businesses, people questioned the motives behind this initiative. We might see in it a desire to solve actual nighttime disturbances (noise, pollution, etc.) or to present an Istanbul where alcohol consumption is not on view. As this measure was invoked during Ramadan, however, patrons saw in it the desire to shrink the perimeter of a district and the customs practiced there.

The aspirations of the mayor of Beyoglu are related primarily to trade and tourism, taking into consideration that Istanbul has become one of the preferred destinations of the Arab world. The so-called “restoration” authorized by the mayor’s office—of majestic, listed buildings dating from the end of the nineteenth century—has led to the disappearance of the architectural heritage, thanks to reconstructions that barely complied with restoration standards. New buildings, built in place of those that were supposed to be restored, are supposed to fulfill the mission of preserving heritage but their faux façades are nothing more than pastiches of the original. In line with a world suffering from oversized malls, gone were the legendary places, cinemas, and pastry shops,¹⁶ vestiges of a togetherness where Turkish friendliness, Levantine heritage, and cultural consumption mingled.

16. The destruction of the Emek movie theater and the *Inci Pastanesi* (pastry shop) solidified the indignation felt. Protective associations multiplied. Atilla Dorsay, the most influential movie critic, announced that he was going to give up his career until these places were returned to the Stambouliotes. The vandalism inflicted on the woodwork and mirrors of the Inci—when the police forces moved in to clear out owners, patrons, and pastries alike—looked like a settlement of accounts.

At the far north of Beyoğlu lies Taksim Square, at the center of which stands the Republic Monument (*Cumhuriyet aniti*). The monument celebrates the heroism of the war of independence and of its commander, Atatürk. Several layers of symbols overlap in Taksim square, and the symbol of republican glory is one of them. The square was used for several decades of celebrations touting the agenda of the Kemalist version of the national saga, as well as for military parades and school parades, all of which were organized around choreographic performances dating from the 1930s and 1940s. The role of the square changed in the 1960s when it was dedicated to opposition and protest demonstrations. Although it was off-limits to parades after the May Day massacre in 1977, which left some 30 lying dead, it continued to be used for protest gatherings and festive celebrations. A monumental Greek Orthodox Church overshadows the southwest corner of the square representing the multicultural identity of the Beyoğlu (Pera) district. At the north end of the square is a park that extends along a green corridor toward the north of the city, as designed by the French urban planner Henri Prost in his plan for Istanbul requested by Atatürk, between 1936 and 1951.¹⁷ It represents modern city life as envisaged by the founders of the Republic. To the east of the square, and built with vertical concrete blocks, the Atatürk Cultural Center bears witness to the type of modernity to which Turkey aspired during the 1960s and 1970s. As a place of memories for republicans and the working class alike, and as vestige of a multifaith Istanbul, Taksim continues to offer visibility to the rallies that take place there.

An urban redevelopment project that threatens to take away these particular functions of the square has mobilized public opinion since 2011. The project's marketing angle, based on the slogan "pedestrianize Taksim," anticipates underground routing for automobile traffic. This calls for excavating ramps that lead toward tunnels, thereby reducing and narrowing pedestrian access to the square—making it unsuitable for gatherings, particularly protests.

The redevelopment project was adopted without consulting civil society. Protests were launched against an uncompromising SDP metropolitan municipality, after the mayor of Greater Istanbul, in a directive intended to squelch any further opposition, asserted that the project emanated from "the will of the prime minister." In a speech, the prime minister revealed that one aim of the project was to deprive Taksim of its role as a safe harbor for protests, by transferring this function to Yenikapi (the location of one of his "crazy projects" for Istanbul), at the southwest border of the

17. Pierre Pinon, "Henri Prost et le plan directeur d'Istanbul: une œuvre inachevée," *Urbanisme* 374 (September–October 2010). Prost's plan provided for a green corridor much longer than that the one that was excavated in the 1950s, when the Hilton Hotel was built, which has survived to this day.

historic peninsula: “Those who are opposed to this project know that they will be lost in the crowd when forced to come to Yenikapi rather than Taksim to protest.”¹⁸ On the grounds of Taksim Gezi Park, adjacent to the square, planning also calls for reconstructing the military barracks destroyed in the 1940s, in all likelihood to create a shopping center. An imposing mosque, as well, ought to rival the modest Republic Monument and the Orthodox Church. Construction began in 2012.

There is nothing more predictable or routine than for a government to attempt to make its particular stamp on the urban landscape by drawing a new symbolic map of the city. However, when the results run counter to the national story as passed down for more than six decades, and to narratives woven into the memory of places, the end result is not social cohesion.

Power Plays with Polarization

Instigating polarization has not always driven the actions of this government and its leader. Until the mid-2000s, their rhetoric and some of their initiatives contributed to the meeting of cultures. Thus, the prime minister lent his support to the creation of modern art museums financed nearly exclusively by the private sector. He arranged for the Istanbul Modern to be established in a warehouse at one of the former city docks and to obtain the required city permits. He personally inaugurated, with great fanfare, Istanbul Modern and SantralIstanbul, a cultural center associated with the private Bilgi University. Even though these measures reflected the desire to reassure Europe about the direction of the JDP government, the time had come to demonstrate the open-mindedness of Islamo-conservatives. Equally, linked to such projects was the expectation that new museums would attract tourists and benefit Istanbul (the prime minister had been the city’s mayor before becoming the head of government in 2003). This occurred in 2004 and 2005, in particular before the European Union, France, and Germany questioned the European vocation of Turkey and blocked several chapters of negotiations.

Today, the prime minister’s strategy is different. He permanently occupies center stage in public life. His extremely frequent and untimely intrusions impose his changing agenda and no longer have anything to do with consensus. His tone is harsh, contentious, and contemptuous toward his opponents.

18. Andrew Finkel, “Destroying Istanbul,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2012,. Yenikapi, a port in Istanbul, is the site for creating an event space to accommodate more than a million people, by backfilling a 600,000 m² area in the Sea of Marmara.

Preoccupied with responding to these successive volleys of abuse, the opposition seems powerless to escape the imposed political agenda. A significant portion of the intelligentsia supported the JDP and its leader, RTE, prior to the 2011 elections, seduced by their ability to oppose the army with promises to solve the Kurdish issue. One year later, little remains of this support. The imprisonment of elected Kurdish officials and the war-mongering approach of RTE in the Syrian conflict have burned more than one bridge. The thunderous and disconcerting statements made by the prime minister have stirred up the press, despite the imprisonment of some 100 journalists and the pressure exerted by those in power.

Several political developments have favored a change in the prime minister's *modus operandi*: (1) The submission of the army to civil authorities (even if not definitive), owing to the famous Ergenekon trials and the lessening of any threat of a military coup d'état (Schmid 2012, 207–217). (2) Stepping back from the European Union. Turkey's eligibility to join the EU has indeed been questioned by France and Germany, but this no longer seems to act as an impediment to the JDP government. The JDP has relied on Europe to send the army back to its barracks, and is clearly less pressured to undertake the reforms required for incorporation into the European Union. (3) In 2011, and, mentioned above, for the third consecutive time, the JDP was reelected to power, this time with 50 percent of the votes. The massive and undeniable nature of this recognition of legitimacy helped to win confidence for RTE as the head of government. The rampant personalization of the first two JDP administrations was confirmed, coupled with a shift in authority.

While the rules prevent the prime minister from seeking a fourth term, the law does allow him to run for president Elected by the majority of the electorate, the president of the Republic currently has very limited powers. The government is drafting a constitutional revision for the purpose of electing the current prime minister to the presidency. In order to amend the Constitution, a three-fifths vote is required. Thus, JDP activities are now devoted to attracting the votes of the Nationalist Movement Party and recognizing internal dissidence toward the party and "Gülenists,"¹⁹ who are not following the shift toward the power of a single man.²⁰

19. From Fethullah Gulen, a religious figure who inspired the eponym movement, known as much for its system of schools in Central Asia and Africa as for its influence in the Islamic movement and certain government agencies. By the time this article was translated into English the Gulenist movement separated dramatically from the prime minister and from the circle around him by in late December 2013 denouncing major corruption of members of government close to RTE and of his son

20. The current president of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, might have the support of this complex web to assume leadership of the government after the next election. The exchange of roles

The strategy adopted by the JDP leadership is characterized by a desire to accentuate the authoritarian leanings and nationalist emphasis of the prime minister's rhetoric, the "braggart" style to which he has given free reign since 2011. This entails outdoing the intransigence about recognizing Turkish and Ottoman identity and grandeur. It is important for the prime minister to show that this recognition takes precedence over fundamental rights and democratic principles. Moreover, heightening tensions and polarizing society is the main feature of this strategy.

Examination of the most recent public performances by the prime minister reveals a policy of creating maximum tension just short of complete rupture (which remains something to be avoided). For example, in January 2011 in the city of Kars, RTE described the monument erected "to the glory of humanity," on the Armenian border, as something monstrous. The municipal government of the city had the monument destroyed despite reactions from the media (Altan 2011). Further, to much surprise, in May 2011 RTE introduced a bill to restrict the right to abortion, and at the same time condemned "convenient" cesarean sections. A portion of female conservative opinion joined with the bill's opponents and the project was buried. In November 2012, this culminated publically with opposition to a television series that pulled in top ratings because it did not conform to Ottoman history,²¹ appealing to the president of the channel to "clean house" among his collaborators, and warning prosecutors to pay attention to the case. A statement made in Konya on December 17, 2013, (while this paper was being drafted), has the prime minister explicitly stating: "The principle of the separation of powers is an obstacle"; further stating that the judiciary's decisions are impediments to actions by the government.

The European Union and the United States would like to find a partner in Turkey, and therefore a democratic country. Despite significant infringement of civil liberties and human rights (particularly with respect to the Kurds), Turkey is still a country ruled by formal democracy. However, there is a major tendency to shift towards an authoritarian regime via the power of a single man, as has already

between Gül and RTE inevitably evokes that between Putin and Medvedev, and will enforce the metaphor of the "Putinization" of the Turkish regime.

21. "The Magnificent Century" is a soap opera that reinvents, in a romantic style, the love affair of Suleiman the Magnificent with Roxelana, and the intrigues of the harem, served by screenwriters; costume designers, and decorators very familiar with the tastes of their audience. The prime minister reproached this series for having shown the sultan only in his harem "while, for the majority of the time, he was on horseback travelling to territorial conquests." One might only suspect that RTE ignored the fact that his electors were also "addicted" to this series, which contributed to its popularity among Arab viewers, who were seduced by the "Turkish lifestyle." However, winning the votes of the far-right electorate seemed more important than disappointing his own electorate.

been experienced by the country. The prime minister justifies his political choices by referring to Islamic values rather than the rule of law and democracy, as when he pleads for interference in the Syrian conflict, saying that Syrian rebels are brothers in Islam.

The polarization of society (around Islamic values), and the heightening of tensions, is the leadership's method for exerting power, in particular by counteracting the latent tendency for varied lifestyles and cultural customs to converge.

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