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Middle East Brief

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The Transformation of Public Space in Turkey

Prof. Dror Ze'evi

One of the mainstays of Turkey's governments throughout its modern history has been a dogged secularism, perhaps best epitomized by the prohibition on women's veiling themselves in universities and other government institutions. More than ten years ago, in 2002, a mildly religious party, the Justice and Development party or AKP (an acronym for its Turkish name, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), came to power, but during most of the years since its leaders cautiously adhered to the rules laid down by Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and by his Kemalist successors in power.

In the last couple of years, however, the AKP, while still paying lip service to secular tenets, has churned out a stream of laws and injunctions that, taken together, amount to a radical transformation of Turkey's public sphere. Major changes have already taken place with respect to school study programs, dress codes, the sale of alcohol, censorship of books and TV series, and the rites and symbolisms of national holidays—and even in the skyline of major cities.

This Brief assesses these recent changes and examines their implications for Turkey today. It begins with a description of the trajectory that the AKP has followed from its ascent to power to the present, and then considers the tactics it has found most suitable for achieving its purposes. It then goes on to survey the transformations that have already taken place in the public sphere and those that are in the planning stages. It concludes with an evaluation of the present state of affairs—and of the direction Turkey may take in the future.

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Background

When Turkey's conservative Justice and Development party won the 2002 elections, fears ran high not only in the United States and Europe, but also in Turkey itself. Previous governments with an Islamist agenda had tried to challenge Turkey's political order and change its basically secular legal system—whereupon the country's staunchly secular army and legal system, quick to portray them as enemies of the state, ousted them and replaced them with like-minded parties. In the last such incident, popularly known as the “post-modern coup” of 1997, Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was forced to step down, and his Welfare Party was disbanded and outlawed.¹

So when the AKP won a decisive electoral victory five years later, garnering slightly more than a third of the vote (the 10 percent threshold left most parties excluded from Parliament), many expected it to go down the same path as its predecessors and try, once again, to return the state back to an Islamist, anti-Western agenda. The pessimists seemed to be vindicated when Turkey refused to join the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 or to allow passage of American troops through its territory. But such worries subsided quickly; if anything, the new government turned out to be more pro-Western than its predecessors. It was careful not to give the European Union or the U.S. cause for concern, and seemed determined to prove that contrary to Kemalist claims, Turkish Islam was totally compatible with democracy and with a market economy.²

Perfected over eighty years, the reigning Kemalist political system devised by Atatürk paid lip service to religion while emphasizing Islam's cultural values and its contribution to the development of modern civilization. Religion was accepted as a matter of individual choice and people were free to pray and to fast, but the ruling elite were adamant that the public sphere should stay secular, an attribute that they equated with modernity. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of its attitude toward religion was the refusal to allow veiled women to take official positions, to appear at formal ceremonies, or to study in universities. (In this context, “veiled” meant covering the hair.³)

During its first two terms in office, the AKP did little to challenge this state of affairs. In fact, many adherents of the old Welfare Party who had voted for the new Islamists on the block were disappointed that the expected transformation did not materialize. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seemed hesitant to the point of reluctance to challenge the Kemalist notion of a secular state. As late as September 2011, almost ten years after the AKP's rise to power and during a visit to Cairo, Mr. Erdoğan incurred the wrath of the Muslim Brotherhood when he advocated that Egypt take a lesson from Turkey and devise a system that separated religion from state.⁴

Instead, the AKP administration invested much more energy in seeking to improve the economic situation and to secure its position in the face of pressure from the military. Even sharp critics of the government had a hard time countering the claim that its main objectives were dismantling the previous authoritarian Kemalist state system and replacing it with an old-fashioned, limited, conservative democracy.

But in the last couple of years, a stream of government decisions challenging the country's entrenched practices has left the public baffled. Few in Turkey can discern the outlines of a clear direction, and the government's ultimate purpose has been characterized as everything from a bold march to democratize the system to any of various sinister Islamist agendas to plain authoritarianism.

External observers tend to interpret such public concerns as the panicky reaction of an old elite that has been sidetracked by new social forces. Indeed, after a decade in which the ruling party hardly made a move to publicly denounce the secular state system, some of these conspiracy theories do seem a bit farfetched.

But a year ago, Mr. Erdoğan finally revealed his plans to reshape Turkey's future. "Do you expect the AKP to raise a generation of atheists?" he challenged a public audience in February 2012. "Of course we are going to raise a generation of devout youth." And when attacked by the media for allegedly forcing religion upon a lay Turkish society, he retorted: "What is the alternative? Should we raise a generation of drug addicts instead?" (He actually used the colloquial term *tinnerci*—"stoner".)⁵

If the Turkish public has learned anything during the first decade of AKP rule, it is that the Prime Minister and his advisers are meticulous planners. Their sure-footed handling of the army, the scourge of previous Islamist governments, was a case in point. So was the assigning of key economic positions and awarding of lucrative contracts to AKP supporters, the so-called "Anatolian tigers." It appears that a similar carefully planned approach has taken shape with a view to raising future generations of Islamic-observant youth. Indeed, an analysis of recent executive and legislative actions indicates that the government has been following a carefully designed, integrated, and gradually unfolding strategy to Islamize the public sphere—and one of the main components of this strategy is the denial of any grand design. Instead, the government presents each of the prospective changes as representing a move away from the autocracy of the past and toward further democratization, away from inequality and toward a more caring social system, or away from discrimination against the more traditional and devout segments of the population in favor of the greater good of the public. The ultimate target is thus often blurred; those who oppose the government cannot muster public support for their opposition, and the transformation of the public sphere thereby proceeds apace.

A principal building block of the government's program is transforming the education system, but for this to succeed it has to include other crucial elements, such as changes in dress codes, censorship of study materials, and a converted yearly calendar. Equally importantly, public space must be remade to reflect the new Turkey. Cityscapes planned in the 1930s and 1940s to impart a sense of secular, modern culture must now be transformed into a space in which religion is symbolically much more prominent.

Clearly, the plan has not simply been foisted on the public from the top down. Most of those who voted for the current government, and quite a few who did not, applaud these

changes and support the AKP's program. Some donate and collect money for religious ventures. Perhaps more importantly, years of centralized and authoritarian rule have taught Turkey's citizens, including those who oppose this transformation, to accept such dictates of government with equanimity and resignation.

Educating the Next Generation

After a dramatic military takeover in 1980, the generals decided to overhaul the Turkish school system. The uncompromising state-enforced secularism of the previous decades, they concluded, could no longer be sustained. Many parents were unhappy that their children were learning next to nothing about the traditions and rituals of Islam, and this was one of the main causes of the political turmoil in the country. In order to foster a sense of unity and of devotion to the homeland, the army introduced a new approach to religion into the school curriculum: National religious studies were to be made compulsory in all schools from fourth grade to graduation.

In order to comply with the army's demands, the Education Ministry devised a new course, "Religious Culture and Morals" (*Din Kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi*), which merged an obligatory class on civic duties with an optional one on religion. This strange hybrid combined teachings on pupils' duties as citizens with lectures on devotional rites. In some of the texts taught at primary school level, an explicit parallel was drawn between rituals of religious sacrifice and soldiers laying their lives on the line for the nation. Thus, rather than marking a return to religion, this was a move toward appropriating faith and making it subservient to the state.⁶

In the years since, while few schools used this opportunity to develop a faith-based curriculum, most others, anticipating the government's wishes, had chosen to emphasize the national-civics part, using the official title of the course as a fig leaf to cover the paucity of religious studies. To remedy this situation, which they portrayed as distressing for parents who wanted their children to know something about their culture, the new AKP government designed a new series of both mandatory and elective courses in Sunni Islam to supplement "Religious Culture and Morals."

This shift toward religious education should be understood in the context of other changes in the school system. True to its incremental strategy, the government announced last year its decision to move from an eight-year primary and four-year high school system to one based on three stages of equal duration, referred to in the media as "4+4+4" (as opposed, that is, to the previous 8+4). Education Ministry officials offered several explanations for this shift. For one thing, they

insisted, the age range in primary schools was unacceptable: Tender six-year-olds, they argued, should not be bullied in the schoolyard by burly eighth-graders. Furthermore, they noted, in village communities, fathers insisted on taking their kids out of school to help with farm chores, so these students would be leaving school after fourth grade anyway, and needed to be able to complete at least one stage of schooling.

Yet it is more likely that the real reason for the change is the government's plan to revitalize religious education. In the previous system, all children were obliged to study in the same (largely secular) schools until eighth grade, and only then those whose parents desired it could transfer to a school with a more religious orientation. In the new system, an integrated religious education system (known to Turks as Imam-Hatip) will be offered from the fifth grade onwards.⁷

Unveiling the Veil

One of the latest tweaks in the education system resulted from the government's decision to do away with mandatory school uniforms. These uniforms, which all children were required to wear at school, were leftovers of a past era, the Education Ministry argued; they instilled a sense of discipline and sternness that was distinctly old-fashioned and opposed to modern ideas of education. But while the uniforms were discarded, this clause was added to the school regulations: "Female students in Imam-Hatip middle and high schools, or in Imam-Hatip departments of multi-program high schools, are allowed to wear a headscarf full time, while students registered in Quran classes in a regular school are allowed to cover their hair during class."⁸ One uniform is thus to be replaced by another, and the door is left open for future changes in the same vein.

In a parallel decision, the government lifted the ban on veiled women in higher education. Officially the law making it illegal to enter a university wearing a veil or head covering is still in place, but the Council of Higher Education (Yök) has recently issued a statement instructing universities to open their gates to covered women. Some ardently secular institutions still resist the instruction and try to restrict access, but the battle lines have been redrawn, and at most establishments this is no longer an issue. It is assumed that in the forthcoming constitution, expected to be brought to popular referendum in the next few months, this obstacle will also be removed legally.⁹

Re-Covering Roxelana

In recent months, the Turkish government has taken on another slice of public life. Censorship has existed in Turkey from Ottoman times, and even before the rise of the AKP hundreds of books were banned, including Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and the poetry of the left-leaning Nazim Hikmet; access to the internet was also restricted. Under the AKP government most of these bans were initially lifted and many previously banned books were reintroduced to the Turkish public, but others were subsequently scrutinized and censored instead. In 2007, the Turkish publisher of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* faced investigation by the public prosecutor for "inciting religious hatred," and currently the censorship board is contemplating censoring works of fiction taught in school, including John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, for their immoral content.¹⁰ In a related act of public censorship, the world-famous Turkish pianist Fazıl Say is standing trial for a message on Twitter that was interpreted by the state's censors as disdainful of religion.¹¹

But Mr. Erdoğan and his team quickly identified the more serious challenge: television and the internet. In November of last year, the Prime Minister took issue with the very popular TV series *A Magnificent Century* (*Mühteşem Yüzyıl*), which is set in the court of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. The series focuses on the Sultan's romantic life and on palace intrigue, and one of its main protagonists is the beautifully conniving Hürrem (known in the West as Roxelana), a harem slave who conquered Suleiman's heart and became his legal wife. Mr. Erdoğan was concerned with how the series depicted the great sultan and his family: For him, as for many others in the political elite, the Ottoman era represents more than just old history. It has become, rather, a paragon of imperial greatness stemming from religious piety, and is thus a source of inspiration for the new Turkey envisaged by the AKP. Commercial TV, it is felt, should not be allowed to mar this myth.¹²

Publicly venting his indignation at the depiction of "our forefathers" in such a lurid fashion, the prime minister explained that Sultan Suleiman had fought on horseback against the enemies of Islam for almost thirty years and had had no time for harem intrigue of this sort. He hinted that Suleiman's wives and concubines were also pious Muslims and did not go about scantily clad as they are depicted on the show. The producers and directors of *Mühteşem Yüzyıl* immediately took the hint and complied with what they imagined his wishes to be. In subsequent episodes, the luscious Roxelana and her ladies in waiting were depicted veiled, devoutly praying for the safe return of their liege from his military exploits.¹³

Replacing the Kemalist Calendar

To complement these intended shifts in public consciousness, the AKP government seems to have another long-term plan: to do away with the constant calendrical reminders of the secular Kemalist republic. The great Atatürk is still too much of a national hero to tackle head-on, but there are quite a few days of remembrance spread throughout the year (Republic Day, Youth Day, Atatürk's Memorial Day, Liberation of Istanbul Day, Victory Day, and others), and they are all opportunities for people to be reminded of Atatürk's principles—including, of course, his secularism. Knowing that the official calendar serves this function of jogging the nation's collective memory, the AKP government has contemplated ways of revising it. In recent years it has attempted to play down republican holidays, issuing directives to schools to limit public displays and more recently even banning the very popular citizens' parades, citing budget constraints and claiming that such public events pose security challenges for the police. The last such incident occurred in Ankara on October 29 of 2012, when citizens barred from marching broke through police barriers and insisted on their right to celebrate Republic Day.¹⁴

Instead of these secular days of remembrance, the AKP government hesitantly pushes a set of religious holidays. The Sunni calendar is problematic in this respect on two counts. The first is that it only includes two significant holidays, and they are already celebrated. (In Turkey they are called *şeker Bayramı* and *Kurban Bayramı*.) Furthermore, these holidays, being determined by the lunar calendar, occur at different times (from one year to the next) in the official solar year—and hence presumably don't offer solid, predictable alternatives to the republican days of remembrance.

Accordingly, the government tried to come up with something new: the establishment of the Prophet Muhammad's "Blessed Birth Week" as a yearly holiday from the 14th through the 20th of April. This holiday, in addition to its inherent religious character, would have the added advantage, from the AKP's point of view, of superseding the well-liked National Sovereignty and Children's Day on April 23. It remains to be seen whether the government can pull off such a radical departure.¹⁵

An Army of Minarets

In 1998, as part of the clampdown on politicians from the outlawed Welfare Party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then mayor of Istanbul, was arrested, sentenced to four months in prison, and barred from political life for four years. His only crime was publicly reciting a poem with religious undertones which included the verse "The mosques are our barracks, the domes

our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers."

Since then this poem seems to have become Mr. Erdoğan's guiding light: In recent years a flurry of mosque building has taken place around the country. In many cases these are local projects funded by municipalities and village communities. But the government is involved in several large-scale mosque building projects as well, the most ambitious of which is the Camlica Mosque, a colossal replica of the famous seventeenth-century Blue Mosque. At 15,000 square meters, (160,000 square feet) this monumental edifice, designed to adorn the highest hill in Istanbul, will be one of the world's largest. But this plan has drawn the ire of critics in Turkey and abroad.¹⁶

Other major landmarks in Istanbul are slated to get their own new mosques as well. Taksim Square in the center of the new part of town is now being rebuilt and will be endowed with a modern mosque for use in public ceremonies. On the Asian side of town, in Göztepe, another project will commence now that a court has overturned a previous injunction and allowed the AKP municipality to build a large-scale mosque there.¹⁷

Similar monumental mosques being built around the country, from Kars in the East to Edirne in the West, proclaim the new principles governing the state and reflect the new choices made by the people—and they also serve as the government's "barracks" for the propagation of religion.

Goodbye to Raki?

Mosques have a perimeter of sanctity around them. Customarily, people do not engage in nonreligious activities, such as drinking alcohol or playing loud music, in their vicinity. It seems that the government intends to use the new mosque network to enlarge those spheres of sanctity until they envelop much of the cityscape.

As in the case of other segments of its long-term program, the AKP government moves slowly and gingerly in this sphere, issuing small directives one by one. Thus, the legal age for drinking was raised to correspond to the required age limits in some other European countries; the sale of alcohol was banned within a designated distance around mosques; drinking has been restricted at open air events and at public concerts and exhibitions; restaurants have been forbidden from advertising alcohol; the sale of alcohol along highways was banned, ostensibly for fear of accidents; and its sale in many coastal vacation spots was restricted, purportedly based on fears of violence.¹⁸ As a consequence of these limitations, obtaining a license for selling alcohol, once a simple formality, has become an overwhelming bureaucratic endeavor, requiring permission from three different authorities (the police, the

local municipality, and the Tourism Ministry), as well as a host of legal documents and payments.¹⁹

Finally, in some areas zoned for entertainment, tables set on the sidewalk for eating and drinking were confiscated by local municipalities. Here again many explanations were offered: Pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk was hindered; the Fire Department required space to maneuver; and sometimes a restaurant had not obtained proper permission from the municipality involved. But the result was one and the same: Many drinking establishments are tottering on the brink of bankruptcy.²⁰

Where Is Turkey Heading?

During its first term in office, and to a lesser extent during the second term, the AKP maintained and even enhanced some civil liberties, (the media were given permission to openly discuss the role of the military in the state, the Kurdish question was opened for public discussion, and so on). It also established cordial relations with the West and encouraged a vibrant economy. But this came at the price of compromising its religious outlook. Having won recent elections for the third time and by a wide margin, it now feels entitled to incorporate its religious worldview into the country's education system and to try to shift the country's conception of moral values, thereby (it hopes) raising a generation after its own heart.

So far, the government's actions—tinkering with the calendar, mandating changes to the education system, constructing new mosques, restricting alcohol consumption—could be explained away as nothing more than making corrections to a previously unbalanced situation, turning away from indulgence in republican nostalgia, challenging Kemalist authoritarianism, or acting out of an honest concern for public safety. Yet viewed in conjunction with all its other moves, they can clearly be seen as a concerted set of steps intended to fulfill the AKP's plan to do away with Ataturk's republic and raise a generation of religious youth.

As he began his third consecutive term in office, Prime Minister Erdoğan finally realized that if past behavior was any indication, there would be no serious opposition to these measures, and the feared Kemalist backlash would not materialize. One reason, perhaps, is the carefully orchestrated way in which he has played his hand so far. Another may be the traditional reluctance of the Turkish public and media to challenge authority. The government is therefore likely to step up its societal engineering project and to be more transparent about it. So in the future we may see more changes in the educational curriculum, more public mosques,

alternative dress codes, and a bolder attack on the secular foundations of the Kemalist state.

Recent developments demonstrate that contrary to previous assumptions, the government will not continue to maintain the status quo ante on religion. But the consequent transformation of public space, already happening at a fast pace, is liable to deepen rifts within Turkish society. It may also increase tensions between the Sunni majority and the various religious minorities within Turkey. No comparable religious education is offered, for example, to the Alevi—a group that makes up about a quarter of the Turkish population but upholds a different set of beliefs from the Sunnis.

It is important to emphasize, however, that despite these changes, Turkey is not likely to become a radical Islamist state. It has large, highly educated secular elites; it is fully integrated into the world's economy, and its current government is still interested in joining the European Union and in maintaining close relations with NATO, Europe, and the United States. It will be interesting to follow developments in Turkey in the coming years and see whether the AKP government nonetheless succeeds in its Islamization project.

Endnotes

- 1 The coup was first designated “post-modern” by Admiral Salim Devrişođlu, commander of the Turkish navy—mainly because, unlike prior military coups, it was achieved through political discourse and psychological warfare—and only the threat of military power.
- 2 “The AKP’s Political Victories” in Zeyno Baran, *Torn Country: Turkey Between Secularism and Islamism* (Hoover Institute, 2010), pp. 53-58*; [Yuksel Taskin and Koray Caliskan, “Turkey’s Dangerous Game,” *Media Monitors Network*, March 29, 2003.](#)*
- 3 See Sam Kaplan, “Din-u Devlet All Over Again: The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey following the 1980 Coup,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002), pp. 117-18.
- 4 “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Criticizes Erdogan’s Call for a Secular State,” *Al Arabiya News*, September 14, 2011.*
- 5 “Erdogan: Bu gençliđin tineri olmasını mı istiyorsun” (Erdogan: Do you want a ‘Stoner’ generation?), *Milliyet*, February 6, 2012.*
- 6 Sam Kaplan, “Din-u Devlet All Over Again,” pp. 119-20. An internet version of the “Religious Culture and Morals” curriculum [in Turkish] can be found at: http://static.eba.gov.tr/assets/media/ekitap/2012_2013/5_dinkulturu_dk.pdf.
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- 12 “Turkey’s PM Erdoğan slams TV series about Ottoman sultan,” *Today’s Zaman*, November 25, 2012.*
- 13 “Hürrem başını kapattı!” *Cumhuriyet*, October 9, 2012.*
- 14 “Police, Protesters Clash at Republic Day March in Turkey,” *CNN*, October 29, 2012*; “Cumhuriyet Bayramı Kutlamaları peşpeşe yasaklandı,” *Medya Tutkunu*, October 26, 2012*; “Gazlı-Sulu Cumhuriyet Bayramı,” *Radikal Türkiye*, October 29, 2012.*
- 15 “Turkey’s Blessed Birth Week,” *Rehmat’s World Blog*, April 17, 2010.*
- 16 “Çamlıca camiye mimarlardan sert tepki,” *NTVMSNBC*, July 05, 2012*; “Çakma Çamlıca Camii,” *Radikal Türkiye*, November 18, 2012.*
- 17 “Taksim’e Cumhuriyetçi Camii Projesi,” *Radikal Türkiye*, May 18, 2012*; “Yeni açılan mimar sinan camii’nin en büyük özelliđi,” *Milliyet Blog*, July 21, 2012*; “Göztepe parkına cami için onay çıktı,” *Radikal Türkiye*, November 23, 2012.*
- 18 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası (2010), Kısım II :Temel Haklar ve Ödevler, Bölüm III :Sosyal ve Ekonomik Haklar ve Ödevler, 58*; “İçki yasađı iskeleye çıktı,” *Radikal Türkiye*, August 25, 2008*; IV. Murat metaphor for Erdoğan. “İçki yasak, 4. Murat geri mi geldi?” *NTVMSNBC*, December 1, 2011*; “Ankara’da içki satan restorana kredi verilmedi,” *ODATV*, July 5, 2011*; Binnaz Toprak, “AKP ve içki yasakları,” *Radikal Türkiye*, April 30, 2012.*
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- 20 “Asmalı Mescid’de masalar kalktı, iş bitti!” *Gazete Vatan*, July 25, 2011*; “Beyođlu’nda Şanslı Masa,” *Radikal Türkiye*, July 26, 2011.*

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