

THE TURKISH MODEL

Marching to Islamic Liberalism

By Mustafa Akyol

Turkey began 2008 in the shadow of a very heated debate. The issue was whether female university students could cover their hair with a headscarf—a practice allowed in the whole free world, except in Turkey, where it was banned by the staunchly secularist Constitutional Court in 1989. The incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP, its Turkish initials) was a “conservative” party led by devout Muslims. They had just won a sweeping election victory six months earlier, in July 2007, and were willing to permit the headscarf—which most of their wives and daughters wore—on campuses.

In February, the AKP, with the support of two other parties in the Turkish parliament, passed an amendment that inserted two clauses into the constitution. One of them stated that all citizens, regardless of their religion, race, or ethnicity, would “benefit from public services equally.” The other amendment provided a guarantee: “No citizen can be barred from the right to higher education.”

These clauses might sound like commonsense declarations to most people, but to the secularist establishment they constituted an unacceptable heresy that opened the doors of the universities to “backward-minded” conservative Muslims. Soon the Constitutional Court stepped in. It not only nullified the amendment but also levied a hefty fine on the AKP government for violating the country’s self-styled secularism. The ruling party, in fact, barely survived being disbanded and buried in Turkey’s political graveyard, where more than two dozen parties rest in peace simply for having failed to comply with some aspect of the official ideology.

▷ Prayer time in a mosque, Istanbul, Feb. 27, 2003.
Chris Hondros/ Getty Images

In the middle of this peculiar political controversy—during which “freedom” and “secularism” had become opposing slogans—an interesting voice emerged from the headscarfed female students whose right to education was being discussed.



On a website titled “We Are Not Free Yet,” three hundred of them put their signatures under the following statement:

What we have suffered since the day that the door of the university was shut in our face taught us something: our real problem is the authoritarian mentality which assumes a right to interfere in the lives, appearances, words, and thoughts of people.

Thus, as women who face discrimination because we cover our heads, we hereby declare that we won’t be happy simply by entering universities with our scarves—unless:

- The Kurds and other alienated groups in this country are given the legal and psychological basis to consider themselves first-class citizens.
- The foundations of the [non-Muslim] minorities that were shamelessly confiscated are given back.
- The “insulting Turkishness” cases [mostly brought against many liberal intellectuals] are brought to an end.

The rest of the text continued to ask for “freedoms” for all suppressed groups in Turkey, including the Alevis, an unorthodox Muslim sect, and denounced “all forms of discrimination, suppression, and imposition.” Finally, these “covered women” were rooting their entire stance in a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed: “The Heavens and the earth stand on justice.”

This genuinely liberal and Islamic message immediately became popular and made national headlines. The number of signatories quickly increased, reaching twelve hundred in just a few weeks. Soon, the three young women who started the initiative, Neslihan Akbulut, Hilal Kaplan, and Havva Yılmaz, published a book titled *We Are Not Free Yet*. In the introduction, they used the same slogan that appeared on their website: “If the matter is freedom, nothing is trivial.”

This was just one example of a phenomenon that has emerged in Turkey since the early 1990s: the growing acceptance and advocacy of liberal political ideas by the country’s practicing Muslims. And how all this came about is a story worth examining.

History Revisited

The story above might seem to highlight a much-referred fact about Turkey and its Islamic heritage: among the Muslim societies of the Middle East, Turkey, despite all its flaws is still the best example of a functioning democracy. Its Islamic movements have almost never followed a radical agenda, and have even come to appreciate the blessings

of modern liberal democracy. For these reasons, Turkey has gone so far as to become a source of inspiration for various actors that have spearheaded the Arab Spring.

But to what we do owe this relative success of Turkey? The common answer, especially in the West, is that we owe it all to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the radical secularist reforms of his era, 1924 and 1938. It is widely believed that with these authoritarian measures—which included the banning of all Islamic schools, Sufi orders and even religious garments—Atatürk’s regime tamed Islam enough to make it democracy-friendly. The Arab world, the narrative goes, only needs its own Atatürks—secular dictators who will crush the power of Islam and make it bow down to modernity.

However, there are two good reasons to doubt that narrative. First, Arabs and other Muslims in fact did have their Atatürks—secular dictators who did try to crush the power of Islam. Reza Shah and his son in Iran, Bourguiba and Ben Ali in Tunisia, or Nasser and his successors in Egypt tried similarly authoritarian measures against Islamic groups and individuals. In fact, most of the regimes overthrown or challenged by the Arab Spring are these very secular dictatorships.

Secondly, the Turkish story is much more complex than the creation-ex-nihilo-by-Atatürk narrative.

Ottoman Delight

To begin with the story, one should note that the pre-“Kemalist” Ottoman Turkey was not in “the age of darkness” before its destruction in World War I, as official Turkish literature has claimed for decades. Quite the contrary, the Ottomans had achieved a lot on the road to modernity, for a simple but good reason: from the 15th century onwards, the Ottoman Turks were the superpower of the Islamic world, and they were right next to Europe. That’s why they discovered the advances of the West before most other Muslim nations, and why they saw the need to cope with them. First they started by reforming their military. Soon, they realized that they needed to incorporate not only the hardware of modernity but also its “software,” i.e. modern political and legal concepts.

Hence came the Ottoman reform edicts of 1839 and 1856, by which the powers of the Sultan/Caliph were limited and the idea of modern citizenship introduced. The non-Muslim subjects of the empire, which had formerly enjoyed “protected” but nevertheless second-class (*dhimmi*) status, according to traditional Islamic law, were granted equal rights. In 1876, the Ottoman Empire accepted a constitution based on liberal principles. Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, an Ottoman bureaucrat and an Islamic scholar, prepared the *Mejelle*, a new legal code that was based on traditional Islamic law but which also included many important modifications thanks to the maxim, “as time changes, the laws should also change.”

In 1908, the Ottoman Parliament reconvened with not just Muslim but also Greek, Armenian, and Jewish deputies. At the time, the most popular maxim among the Ottoman intelligentsia, which included many devoutly religious figures, was “freedom.” Prince Sabahattin, the nephew of Sultan Abdülhamid II, promoted the principles of individual entrepreneurship and a limited, decentralized government. The compatibility of Islam and popular sovereignty had long been declared by Islamic modernists such as Namık Kemal. In the last decades of the empire, societies emerged with names like *Taal-i Nisvan* (The Advancement of Women) or *Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan* (The Defense of the Rights of Women). In 1910 Ottoman feminist Fatma Nesibe, a Muslim follower of John Stuart Mill, even argued that the empire was on the eve of a “feminine revolution.”

In short, the Ottoman Empire had begun its modernization at least a century before the Turkish Republic, and had achieved a lot on that route. The modern Turkish Republic owed much to its Ottoman predecessors. The Republic’s founders, after all, Mustafa Kemal included, had been educated in the modern schools founded by Sultan/Caliph Abdülhamid II.

Secularism In, Democracy Out

Yet there was a profound difference between the Ottoman modernization and the superceding “Kemalist” one, i.e., that of Kemal Atatürk and his followers: the Ottomans had tried to create a synthesis of Islam and modernity, whereas the Kemalists had neither the time nor the vision to do that. Instead, taking their inspiration from the staunchly secularist French Enlightenment and the anti-clerical French Revolution, the Kemalists tried to minimize the role of religion in society through the use of state power.

Actually the Kemalist project, carried out by the Republican People’s Party founded by Atatürk in 1923, was not the only available vision for modern Turkey. In the beginning, there was another political party with a more Ottoman-like mindset. Founded by war heroes such as Kazım Karabekir, Refet Bele and Rauf Orbay, the Progressive Republican Party (PRP) outlined a program in 1924 which proposed a free market economy, a more gradual reform process, a kindler approach towards Kurds, and, most important of all, esteem for religion. But the party could survive only for six months: it was closed down by the Kemalist regime on June 5, 1925, and its leaders were excluded from politics. The announced reason was the Article 6 in its program, which noted, “We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments.”

Thus arose Turkey’s “single party regime” (1925–50) and its iron-handed policies aimed at secularizing the public square. Textbooks and state rhetoric started to glorify the pagan culture of the pre-Islamic Turks, and scientism became a sort of

official faith. Some Kemalists even considered turning the magnificent Blue Mosque of Istanbul into an art gallery.

The early Turkish Republic crushed not only political opposition but also civil society. Among others, the feminist societies dating from the Ottoman years were closed down. The regime did not oppose feminism per se, but assumed that, like everything else, it was “of the state, by the state and for the state.”

Quite notably, the Kemalist Revolution was a great leap forward for secularization, but it was a great regress for democracy. The latter had its roots in the late Ottoman period, in which an elected parliament and competing political parties had emerged. But Atatürk turned the multi-party system into a single-party dictatorship. He sacrificed democracy, in other words, for the self-styled secularism he introduced.

The Turning Point (1950)

Had Turkey remained under the thumb of the Kemalist single party regime, its political fate probably would not have been too different than those of Egypt or Tunisia, which have both suffered under secular dictatorships until the Arab Spring of 2011. Luckily, though, Turkey would experience its “spring” as early as 1950, when the country had its first free and fair elections since the beginning of the republic in 1923.

This restoration of democracy had a few notable causes:

1) Atatürk had died in 1938. His successor, İsmet İnönü, was a relatively moderate and less authoritarian figure, who could tolerate being challenged by an opposition party and concede power to it.

2) Turkish society, at least its elite, was conscious of representative and multi-party politics, thanks to the democratic roots in the Ottoman period.

3) In the post-1945 era, unlike most Arab countries, whose main political problem was de-colonization (and later Israel), Turkey’s main concern was the Soviet threat. This led Ankara to orient itself towards the “free world,” and a transition to democracy seemed necessary to cope with the Western bloc.

All this led the Kemalist regime to accept the formation of Turkey’s “second party,” the center-right Democrat Party (DP) led by Adnan Menderes in 1946. This party entered the elections of 1950 with the slogan, “Enough: The nation has the word!” The DP was an heir to some of the liberal ideas of the Progressive Republican Party, which had been closed down in 1925. It was therefore more tolerant of and respectful to religion, more lenient to the Kurds, and in favor of a market economy rather than the “statism” of the Kemalists.

The DP won the elections decisively. Its leader, Menderes, who had promised to make Turkey “a little America,” soon embraced the Marshall Plan, sent Turkish troops to the Korean War, and joined NATO. He also created an economic boom that would

grant him three election victories in a row—the second one with 57 percent of the votes, an unmatched record in Turkish political history. Among his supporters were the pious Muslims of Turkey, who realized that democracy would bring them at least some of the religious freedom for which they yearned under Kemalist oppression.

However, the Kemalist “center”—the bureaucracy, the military, the judiciary, and the universities—despised Menderes, regarding him as the leader of a counterrevolution. Their cumulative hatred was unleashed on May 27, 1960, when the Turkish military staged a coup, established martial law, and imprisoned hundreds of DP members on Yassıada, an island on the outskirts of Istanbul. The junta soon set up a show trial, which sentenced Menderes and two of his ministers to execution, for subjective crimes including “empowering religious retrogrades.” On September 17, 1961, Adnan Menderes, the most popular prime minister in Turkish history, was hung on the gallows.

This was a crucial turning point. The “Turkish Spring” had begun in 1950, by transferring political power peacefully via free and fair elections. But a decade later, this “spring” was crushed by a military junta, which would leave behind a new constitutional regime that gave the military dominance over elected politicians.

In the next fifty years, this quasi-military regime would be the “Turkish model,” and the political scene would be defined by the fault line created by the 1960 coup: secularists became the best allies of the military, seeing the latter as the “guardians of the republic”—the republic being a euphemism for a Kemalist oligarchy. The Islamic camp, on the other hand, despite an Islamist swing in the 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and his National View movement, increasingly became the champion of democracy. Thanks to the DP experience, pious Muslims realized that they could bring their favorite politicians to power and tame an otherwise oppressive state.

The Özal Revolution

On September 12, 1980, Turkey entered a new era. Turkey’s generals launched another military coup and initiated a brutal three-year-long military rule, during which thousands of politicians and activists were jailed and many of them tortured. When the generals scheduled national elections again in 1983, they allowed only newcomers to run for office. Turgut Özal, a former bureaucrat and economist, stood out, and his newly formed Motherland Party came to power. The next ten years would be “the Özal decade,” a revolutionary age of liberalization during which the Islamo-liberal synthesis, almost forgotten after decades of forced amnesia, was reborn.

As a member of a Naqshbandi family, Özal was a devout believer in Islam. As a former employee of the World Bank and the private sector, he also was a genuine believer in the market economy and, in a broader sense, the American idea of liberty.

In the words of American journalist Robert Kaplan, Özal “loved to read the Koran and watch soap operas, to bang his head against the carpet in a Sufi mosque and go to Texas barbecues.” That helps explain why, as the most far-reaching Turkish leader since Atatürk, he would be able to “restore religion to Turkey’s political space without threatening the country’s pro-Western orientation.”

Özal based his policies on the notion of “the three freedoms”—of ideas, religion, and enterprise. The economy opened up, abandoning decades-old Kemalist policies of protectionism, “statism,” and “a planned economy.” Some of the authoritarian articles in the penal code, which banned “religious propaganda” and many other “thought crimes,” were rescinded. The tyrannical prohibitions on the Kurdish language, which criminalized even Kurdish songs, were, at least partly, lifted. (Özal also proudly noted that his mother was Kurdish, thus breaking the taboo on the K-word.)

Özal also tried to restore respect for the Ottomans, who for decades had been the *bête noir* of official ideology. He even found parallels between the Ottoman Empire and the United States, arguing that both granted diverse communities the freedom to exercise their religion, culture, and economic aspirations. In 1987, he submitted Turkey’s application to the European Union. Two years later, he became the president, yet he continued to guide policy via a loyal prime minister. (In the Turkish system, the presidency is the highest post, but the prime minister holds more power.)

Most Kemalists, unsurprisingly, despised Özal, seeing him as a counter-revolutionary undoing all the great things Atatürk had done half a century earlier. The fact that he was both pro-Islamic and pro-American even led some to suspect a Western plot to overthrow the Kemalist Republic—paranoia that would reach its zenith in the 2000s, when the pro-Islamic AKP became the champion of the EU bid.

Özal also had his fans. Among them was the tiny group of liberal intellectuals—most of them secular but not secularist—who had been sidelined for decades in a political sphere dominated by the Kemalist state, the Marxist Left, and the nationalist Right. Also in favor of Özal were the country’s millions of Kurds, whose identity had been systematically suppressed since the early years of the Republican era. The third and largest group of Özal supporters was the Islamic camp. To them, he was not only a savior who eased the burdens of the ultra-secularist regime but also, as the first Turkish prime minister to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was the man who returned religion to public respectability.

With the Özal revolution, people in the Islamic camp also started to realize that their yearning for religious freedom could be satisfied by adopting Western-style liberal democracy, rather than the Islamist utopia that the Islamist movement of Erbakan had been promising. For decades, most of them had perceived Kemalism, which claimed to

Westernize Turkey, as a natural extension of the West. This started to change as these Islamic Turks learned more about the world. Some of the young headscarfed women, excluded from Turkish colleges, headed to universities in Europe and the United States, where they found freedom and respect. Soon they got their facts right. The liberal West, they realized, was better than the illiberal “Westernizers” at home.

The Last Coup

In April 1993, Turgut Özal died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of sixty-six. Following a huge public funeral, he was buried at a site next to the Adnan Menderes Mausoleum—which he had had built in 1990 to honor his precursor, whom the military had executed three decades earlier.

The next nine years in Turkish politics, until the arrival of the AKP in November 2002, has sometimes been called “the lost decade,” because it saw a series of inefficient and unsuccessful coalitions that ultimately led the country into a dreadful economic crisis in 2001. But this period also brought about some significant changes that transformed the Islamic camp.

One of the outcomes of Özal’s death was the resurgence of National View, the political Islamist movement led by Necmettin Erbakan. In June 1996, Erbakan’s Welfare Party built a coalition with the center-right party led by Tansu Çiller, who had previously been Turkey’s first female prime minister. This dual government lasted for a year, during which Erbakan found the chance to implement only a few of his ideas, such as building closer ties with other Muslim countries and hosting receptions for *tarikats* leaders in his official residence—all shocking to the secular establishment. But what provoked the secularists even more was his rhetoric, and that of his party members, which seemed to herald an Islamist regime.

In response to this Islamist challenge, on February 28, 1997, the military initiated a process that later would be dubbed “the post-modern coup.” The generals orchestrated the whole Kemalist “center”—the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the universities, and the “mainstream” media—to force the government to resign, then to close down the Welfare Party, and finally to crack down on Islamic groups and their resources. In June 1997, the generals declared a long list of companies as “backward-minded” (i.e., too religious) and promoted boycotts of their products. Some Islamic leaders were put on trial for “establishing anti-secular organizations.” Some “undesirable” journalists were fired and several were even discredited with fake documents prepared by the military. Certain members of the Welfare Party, including its rising star, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then mayor of Istanbul, were given prison terms for “inciting hatred” against the Kemalist regime. “Erdoğan’s political career is over,” some newspapers wrote in September 1998. “From now on, he can’t even be a local governor.”

The speech that earned Erdoğan a ten-month prison term was indeed harsh, but it also included an interesting remark that hinted at the direction he would follow: “Western man has freedom of belief,” Erdoğan said. “In Europe there is respect for worship, for the headscarf. Why not in Turkey?”

The AKP’s Path to Post-Islamism

In the aftermath of “the post-modern coup” of 1997, a more moderate group in the Welfare Party looked for a new vision. Led by Abdullah Gül, probably the most sophisticated figure in the party’s ranks, this “reformist movement,” spoke more favorably of Western-style democracy and began to argue that “the state should be in the service of the people, rather than a holy state that stands far above the people.” This movement soon broke with National View and joined forces with Erdoğan to found the Justice and Development Party in August 2001.

From its first day, the AKP declared that it was not “a political party with a religious axis”; it defined its ideology as “democratic conservatism.” In November 2002, a little more than a year after its founding, the AKP won the general elections with 32 percent of the votes and took power. To the surprise of the whole world, this post-Islamist party turned out to be a most dedicated and successful pursuer of Turkey’s bid to join the EU, and realized a staggering number not to mention scope of democratic reforms.

This might well have been interpreted as a historic defeat for Turkish Islamism, but the Kemalists believed the exact opposite. They had never trusted the AKP, insisted on calling its members “Islamists,” and asserted that the party’s transformation was just a trick to deceive outsiders. Some of their conspiracy theories were mind-boggling. In 2007, for example, a staunchly Kemalist author, Ergun Poyraz, produced a series of bestsellers arguing that both Erdoğan and Gül were “secret Jews” collaborating with “international Zionism” in order to destroy Atatürk’s republic and enslave the Turkish nation.

This anti-Semitic lunacy was just one of the many signs of the amazing transformation occurring in the political landscape. The AKP’s outreach to the West had turned the tables, and now the Kemalists, who were also horrified that the EU was asking for more rights for Kurds and other minorities, had started to turn anti-Western.

Yet the Kemalists were not alone in suspecting that the AKP had a “hidden agenda.” Some Western observers also believed that any party made up of devout Muslims must necessarily be illiberal and undemocratic. Critics could certainly point to traces of Islamist sentiment in the AKP’s ranks, along with the typical problems of Turkey’s patrimonial politics, including nepotism and corruption. Erdoğan also showed signs of what can be called “Muslim nationalism”—or simply “Muslimism”—in the way he demonstrated an emotional affinity for Muslim actors around the world. Yet still the AKP’s post-Islamist position was genuine, for a few good reasons.

First the new direction that the AKP embraced, “democratic conservatism,” was not unheard-of in Turkey. Quite the contrary; it had its roots, as we have seen, among the Islamic liberals of the Ottoman Empire as well as in the center-right tradition of Turkish politics represented by the Progressive Republican Party in 1924, by Adnan Menderes between 1950 and 1960, and by Turgut Özal between 1983 and 1993.

Second, the AKP’s political transformation was in line with the changing intellectual landscape in Turkey. Classical liberalism, an idea popular in the late Ottoman Empire but denounced by the Kemalist Republic, was rediscovered in the late 1980s, thanks to the reforms of Özal and the efforts of new organizations such as the Ankara-based Association for Liberal Thinking. The nascent group of liberal intellectuals was critical of Kemalist secularism and in favor of broader religious freedom. Their growing interaction with Islamic conservatives gave the latter group new perspective and rhetoric. Hence, from the early 1990s onward, Islamic intellectuals started to question the idea of “an Islamic state” and instead spoke of “a non-ideological state” or “a neutral state,” defending “pluralism” as their social ideal.

In 1998, the influential Gülen Movement, an Islamic community, organized a conference entitled “Islam and Secularism,” attended by a handful of the most prominent theologians and Islamic pundits of Turkey. Following three days of discussion, they declared that Islam and the secular state were compatible, as long as the latter respected religious freedom. The modernist theologian who championed this view, Mehmet Aydın, who promotes “liberal democratic culture” for the whole Muslim world, would become the minister responsible for the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) in the AKP’s first term.

The third factor that helps explain the transformation of the AKP was a gift from Özal to Turkey: free market capitalism. And it was this factor that ultimately was so definitive and vital to the change in Turkish Islam.

The Rise of Islamic Capitalism

As I argue in my book, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, Islam was born as a business-friendly religion. The subsequent rise of “Islamic capitalism” facilitated the dynamism and splendor of Islamic civilization, while its decline resulted in the stagnation and eventual decline of Islamdom. The Ottomans realized—albeit quite belatedly—the importance of private business and tried to jumpstart it via some of the *Tanzimat* reforms. However, even though the Ottoman efforts led to the appearance of a Muslim middle class, this development was very limited in scope. The bourgeoisie remained primarily non-Muslim until the fall of the empire.

That’s why the Young Turks, and later the Kemalists, sought to create a “national bourgeoisie” that had state support. They were successful to a certain degree, but it

occurred by unfair methods. An “opportunity space” for Turkish capitalists opened up because of the wartime expulsion of Armenians—a tragic decision that led to sporadic mass murders—and later a “population exchange” with Greece. The Kemalist regime also imposed a hefty “wealth tax” on Jews, Greeks, and Armenians between 1942 and 1944, under a cabinet with Nazi sympathies. Those unable to pay, in line with the dark standards of the time, were sent to a labor camp in Eastern Turkey.

Both the formation and the composition of this state-made “national bourgeoisie” were unfair. Only urbanites who could wine and dine the secular politicians and bureaucrats received lucrative contracts and loans from the state. By the end of the 1940s, the Kemalist “center” had successfully created a business elite in its own likeness.

Meanwhile, religion had survived mainly among the less privileged. “The nation-state belonged more to us than to the religious poor,” says Orhan Pamuk, Turkey’s Nobel laureate in literature, recalling his childhood days in 1950s Istanbul. But, he adds, secular people like him were also afraid of “being outclassed by people who had no taste for secularism.”

Pamuk’s fears would start to be realized a few decades later, during the Özal Revolution. By liberalizing the economy, diminishing the role of the state, and personally inspiring a religiously devout and economically entrepreneurial spirit, Özal created space for Islamic-minded entrepreneurs. As early as the late 1980s, economists started to talk about “Anatolian Tigers”—companies founded in the conservative cities of Anatolia that quickly utilized the groundbreaking opportunities for manufacturing and exporting in the brave new world of the free market.

In 1990, a group of these conservative businessmen created a union named MÜSIAD, a clear alternative to the well-established TÜSIAD (Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association), which represented the more secular “Istanbul bourgeoisie.” The letter “M” stood for the word *müstakil*, or “independent,” but many thought it actually meant “Muslim,” as most MÜSIAD members are mosque-going conservatives whose wives and daughters wear headscarves.

In 1994, MÜSIAD published an Islamic economic manifesto in a booklet titled *Homo Islamicus*. The document encouraged hard work and free trade, referring Turks to the life of the Prophet Mohammed as a merchant. It vigorously defended the free market system and opposed the state’s intrusive role in the economy. It also added that theirs was a capitalism tamed by the compassionate and altruistic values of Islam, not a “ruthless” one.

The ‘Calvinists’ of Islam

One of the urban centers that gave rise to the Anatolian Tigers was Kayseri, a mid-size city in the heartland of Turkey. Kayserians had always been famous for both

business-mindedness and religiosity, but they had their great leap forward courtesy of the Özal Revolution. From the mid-1980s onward, the city experienced an industrial boom, with hundreds of new factories opened. By the mid-2000s, just one of its textile companies produced one percent of the world's denim for brands such as Levi's, Wrangler, and Diesel. Kayseri's furniture companies supplied 70 percent of the Turkish market and exported their wares to many countries in the Middle East.

In 2005, a Berlin-based think tank, the European Stability Initiative (ESI), studied Kayseri to understand the secret of its economic miracle. After several weeks conducting interviews with the city's prominent businessmen, the ESI team wrote a report that emphasized the curious role of religion in the motivation of these entrepreneurs. "Nine out of ten of one's fate depends on commerce and courage," one of the Kayseri businessmen said, quoting the Prophet Mohammed. Another businessman argued, "It is good for a religious person to work hard," and "to open a factory is a kind of prayer." The founder of a furniture company stated, "I see no black and white opposition between being modern and [being] traditional," and said that he was "open to innovation."

"To understand Kayseri," the former mayor of the town, Şükrü Karatepe, told the ESI researchers, "one must read Max Weber." Weber, of course, pointed to the role that ascetic and hardworking ethic of early Protestants, particularly Calvinists, played in the rise of modern capitalism in Europe. According to Karatepe, one could observe the same work ethic in Kayseri and a few other Anatolian cities, thanks to the teachings of Islam. Fittingly, the ESI researchers titled their report "Islamic Calvinists." Their conclusion was that Kayseri was only a single case study, and, in general, "over the past decade [1995–2005], individualistic, pro-business currents [had] become prominent within Turkish Islam."

These "individualistic, pro-business currents" were certainly capitalist, but not materialist, hedonist, or selfish. Quite the contrary, they went hand in hand with a strong sense of social responsibility, as emphasized by Islam. Kayseri's Islamic entrepreneurs spent more than \$300 million in five years to support clinics, schools, and various other charitable organizations. By 2005, sixteen separate soup kitchens in the city were serving almost ten thousand people daily. Kayseri's culture was a combination of "entrepreneurship, asceticism, and altruism."

The AKP's political transformation was not unrelated to the interests of these Islamic Calvinists. The latter needed a Turkey that had been integrated into the global economy, had anchored its stability in the EU, and had closer ties with all the neighboring countries—the exact strategy of the AKP. No wonder all of the "Islamic Calvinists" were supporters of Erdoğan and Gül, and Kayseri was in effect an AKP city, giving the party a staggering 66 percent of its votes in 2007.

The Muslim Middle Class

In July 2009, the founder of MÜSIAD, Erol Yerar, a practicing Muslim, gave an interview to a Turkish newspaper, sparking a nationwide debate. The headline read, “We Are the Real Bourgeois Class of Turkey.” Yerar argued that while some big businesses were supported by the state, “we grew with our own effort, much like the bourgeoisie in Europe.”

Yerar also noted something significant: on the one hand, Muslim entrepreneurs were creating a capitalism inspired by their religious values; on the other hand, their religious values were being altered by their engagement in capitalism. “When we held our first meeting in a five star hotel,” he recalled, “some of our friends [in MÜSIAD] were asking, ‘What are we doing here?’ Most of them had never traveled abroad and were hostile to Europe, America, and Russia. . . . They wanted to leave their companies to their sons, and did not care much about the education of their daughters. Since then, these wrong notions have changed a lot. Now they are traveling to Europe just to see it more and more. . . . Recently I entered a little mosque in a big shopping mall in Istanbul. I looked at the shoes; they were all high-quality brands! This is the revolution that is taking place in Turkey.”

In other words, engagement with the modern world as its partner has ameliorated formerly negative attitudes toward it. The experiences of these Muslim businessmen are quite different from engagement with the modern world as its victims—as Muslims under Western occupation or a secularist dictatorship would see themselves. It is also different from being the modern world’s outsiders, as many marginalized Muslim immigrants in European societies feel.

The Islamic Calvinists also created jobs for a new generation of Muslim professionals. Hence, in just two decades—from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s—a “Muslim middle class” emerged, to the shock of the secularists. And as its social context changed, this middle class started to change its political attitudes. One example was the decline of Islamism. A public survey conducted by a liberal Turkish think tank in 2006 (when the AKP was in power) showed that the demand for a “*sharia* state” in Turkish society had fallen from 21 percent to 9 percent in just seven years. When questions were asked about some extreme measures of the *sharia*, such as stoning, this support dropped to one percent.

“Ah, those idealist *mujahids* of the 70s,” wrote an Islamic pundit in 2009, “now they all have become moneymaking *müteahhids* [i.e., building contractors].”

In addition to its changed outlook on political life, the new Muslim middle class started to develop a whole new culture. An interesting study that demonstrates this transformation comes from a Turkish sociologist who examined the content of “Islamic novels” in Turkey. The change became clear when he contrasted two eras of

novels—the first being the 1980s, the second starting from the mid-1990s. In the first era, all of the characters in these novels were clear-cut figures—immoral secularists versus exemplary Muslims. Each story had a hero who, after some soul-searching, saw the light and became a devotee of “the Islamic cause.” Even his marriage was about “raising good kids for Islam,” and not focused on romance and love.

In the second era, though, the characters in the “Islamic novels” became much more real and their stories more complex. Now the secular figures were not necessarily all bad, and the Islamic ones were more human—with sins, self-doubts, and love stories. Moreover, criticism was now directed not only to the outsiders but also to the Islamic camp itself. One of the female authors whose earlier novels idealized “the Islamic way of life” was now criticizing injustices within the Islamic community, such as misogynist husbands who adopt mistresses as “second wives.”

In short, in the words of sociologist Kenan Çayır, Islamic literature shifted from “a rhetoric of collective salvation” to “new individualistic Muslimhoods.” And this was directly related to the changing socio-economic background of the writers and their readers. The Islamic novels of the 1980s “reflected the experiences of the newcomers to the big cities... people of the lower class.” But in the late 1990s, those people were no longer newcomers; “they had found modern jobs as engineers, mayors, businessmen, and businesswomen.” No wonder that, in this era, the old “salvation novels” and other “ideological books” did not sell well anymore. What instead had become popular were books about personal development. As pious Muslims entered the urban middle class, in other words, their understanding of religion became less ideological and more individualistic.

In 2009, an Islamic Turkish intellectual summed up the change: the modernizing Muslims of Turkey, he wrote, were now more interested to hear about “the Koran and freedom” rather than “the Koran and obedience.”

Democracy and the Market Economy

This is the story that lies behind the make up and the success of Turkey’s AKP—a party which still contains some traits of Turkey’s intrinsically authoritarian political culture, but whose post-Islamist transformation has been genuine and significant.

In a nutshell, what has happened in Turkey in the past eighty years is that the society has not become as thoroughly secularized as the Kemalist Revolution intended. A large part of the society remained piously Muslim but, thanks to their access to democracy since 1950, these pious Muslim Turks never followed a radical, let alone violent, agenda. Instead of opposing democracy—as some Middle Eastern Islamists have done—Turkey’s Islamic movements gradually became the champions of democracy.

On the other hand, the expanded market economy, along with urbanization, gradually closed the gap between the urban seculars and the formerly rural conservatives and “Islamist Calvinists”. This is important, for throughout the whole Middle East, the secularist-Islamist divide is often also a class conflict—the rich versus the poor. Turkey’s “Islamist Calvinists” have overcome this added layer, making themselves as cosmopolitan-minded as, or sometimes even more than, the secularists.

Therefore, one could well say that Turkey’s secret lies less in secularist legacy of Atatürk—and more so in the “conservative” legacy of Menderes, Özal, and lately Erdoğan. Atatürk’s vision was based on a rejection and suppression of Islam for the sake of modernity. The latter vision, however, is about how to be modern and Muslim at the same time. Therein lies the better “Turkish model,” if other Muslim nations would ever need one.