



## The sum of all secular fears — a sequel

Mustafa Akyol Turkish Daily News  
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**I don't share Mr. Bekdil's pessimistic scenario for the future of the 'Islamist Turk' and what that will do to Turkey. But I do have serious doubts about the capacity of the 'secularist Turk' to embrace democracy and freedom.**

Recently the TDN ran a piece of mine titled "The sum of all secular fears." Last Wednesday my "column neighbor" Burak Bekdil responded with "The sum of all secular fears – a reply." And now here is my reply to the reply.

First, I should thank Mr. Bekdil for his kind and generous remarks about my piece. I can unreservedly express the same appreciation for his column, including this recent "reply," which was definitely smart and witty. Yet I have to add several refinements and even an outright correction.

The correction is that the "Islamist Turk" Mr. Bekdil describes – the bigot who beats up his wife, supports suicide bombing, and sees all non-Muslims as evil – does not represent the "ideal Turkey" I have in mind. My ideal Turkey would be defined not by religious fanaticism – or the irreligious one, for that matter – but by freedom and tolerance. If I ever write an "I have a dream" speech, I would be calling for tranquility and respect between observant Muslims, non-observant Muslims, atheists, agnostics, Turks, Kurds, Christians, Jews and whomever you can think of.

However ideals rarely turn into realities. The more likely outcome, according to Mr. Bekdil, is that the "Islamist Turk" will be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth of Anatolia. He and his wife(s) will produce more offspring than the secularist Turks, and the former will triumph over the latter by simply winning the war of demographics.

Is Mr. Bekdil right? And am I simply naive?

### The trouble with demography games:

This "argument from demography" has become quite popular recently, and has been a source of doomsday scenarios on the future of not just Turkey, but also good old Europe. Popular figures such as the conservative Bernard Lewis, the neoconservative Mark Steyn, and the Islamophobic-conservative Bat Ye'or argue that at the end of the 21st century, Europe will turn into "Eurabia," simply because the post-Christian Europeans are failing to create families, whereas the Muslim immigrants are keen on making more and more babies.

Yet all these alarmist projections have a fatal flaw: They extrapolate from current birth rates and assume that those trends will remain the same. However, as Muslim immi-

grants in Europe adapt to modern life, their birth rates might well drop. Large families are basically a good strategy for agricultural societies – the more kids you have, the more work force you have on the fields and in the barns. When you adjust to city life, though, raising even one child becomes enough of a challenge. You need to pay more for his upbringing, and have less time to care for him.

Similarly the reason that Mr. Bekdil's "Islamist Turk" has more children than my "secularist Turk" is that the former is still living in cultural codes shaped in a rural setting. The more he will adapt to urban life, the less kids he will have. (There are also some religious instructions to "multiply," but once the social incentive goes away, such textual decrees lose much of their influence.) The children of the "Islamist Turk" will be even much more urbane – and perhaps even go secular.

### The 'Islamist Turk' revisited:

For all those reasons, Mr. Bekdil's the-bigoted-Muslims-are-coming claim does not look terribly convincing to me. What is even less persuasive is the very portrait of the "Islamist Turk" he drew. Turkey has no shortage of such bigots, of course, but if we assume that Mr. Bekdil's caricature represents the majority of Turkey's observant Muslims, we will be dead wrong.

The misogynistic, pro-terrorist and anti-Western Muslim he describes looks very "Milli Görüş" to me, the political/religious line which is represented in today's Turkey by the Saadet Party whose votes do not exceed 3 percent. In other Islamic circles, which would, politically speaking, prefer the AKP, there are groundbreaking changes. Mr. Bekdil's "Islamist Turk" believes that all Christians and Jews are doomed by God, but Turkey's biggest Islamic movement, which is led by the popular preacher Fethullah Gülen, is also the greatest champion of inter-faith dialogue and respect. (Gülen's favorite paper, Zaman, also ran opinion pieces that denounced attacks against Israeli civilians.)

While Mr. Bekdil's "Islamist Turk" thinks that all sorts of interest is evil, there are theologians in Turkey who make a distinction between usury, which is denounced by the Koran, and modern banking. It is not an accident that Prime Minister Erdoğan, in a speech given at an international Islamic conference, called on Arab leaders to redefine the Islamic ban on interest and warned that "Islamic

banking” could turn into a "trap" that might hinder development in the Muslim world.

As for women's rights, Turkey's Islamic circles are again undergoing a rapid evolution. We have outspoken Islamic feminists who call for “saving Islam >from male domination.” The Diyanet, the official religious body, announced last year that it would cleanse the hadith tradition (the reported sayings and deeds of the prophet) from remarks that humiliate women. And as the recent report by the ESI (European Stability Initiative), “Sex and Power in Turkey,” exposed, Turkey is actually undergoing a feminist revolution and observant Muslims are a part of it.

#### **The silent Islamic reformation:**

In short there is a silent reformation going on in Turkey's Islamic circles – a phenomenon which unbiased secular sociologists such as Şerif Mardin, Nilüfer Göle or Elizabeth Özdalga have been trying to tell us since the '80s.

The “secularist Turks” that I made fun of in my earlier piece don't just close their eyes to all these social developments, but they also resist any change in their own rigid ideology. One notable scholar who underlined this problem is Dr. Baskın Oran, who is currently running for Parliament from Istanbul as an independent – and a very liberal – candidate. About a year ago he co-authored with his colleague, Dr. Elçin Aktoprak, a four-day article series for daily Radikal in which he argued, “The Isla-

mists in Turkey, unlike the seculars, are changing very rapidly.” Talking about a “Sunni Protestantization” thanks to the rise of “Muslim bourgeoisie,” Dr. Oran concluded: “Turkey's Islamists, thanks to... secularization but more so to the impact of globalization, have entered into a process of ‘catharsis,’ a sort ‘self-critical purification,’ something which the Kemalists have not yet been able to accomplish. This is a limited modernization, but it is modernization itself.” (Radikal, June 16, 2006)

That's why I don't share Mr. Bekdil's pessimistic scenario for the future of the “Islamist Turk” and what that will do to Turkey. But I do have serious doubts about the capacity of the “secularist Turk” to embrace democracy and freedom. Mr. Bekdil says the Islamist Turk is destined for “a journey to the ‘East’ with a forceful stopover in the ‘West.’” I rather think that our secularist Turk is on a journey that started with the West, yet might well end up in some form of Baath-like oriental despotism. Some of our hard-line generals openly call for abandoning NATO, and express their admiration for Russia and China. Our official cult already looks like that of North Korea. And most Kemalists I know are dedicated enemies of the EU process, globalization, and foreign capital.

This Monday we will wake up and see whether their vision finds broad public support. My guess is that the election results will be a disappointment for them – and a blessing for the rest of the country.