

Obama in Istanbul: Test for the West

April 6 2009, ISTANBUL - "If we can show that a big Muslim nation can modernize itself with the help of friends," former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has argued on behalf of Turkey's admission to the European Union, "it demonstrates that a strong civil society, equal rights for men and women, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a modern administration and modern economy are not in contradiction to Islam. This would be the most powerful message against the jihadists and terrorists."

That is certainly President Barack Obama's hope when he attends the UN "Alliance for Civilizations" gathering in Istanbul this week after a pointed visit in Ankara to the grave of Atatürk, modern Turkey's secular saint and founder. The meeting is of particular importance because Mohamed Khatami, the reformist former president of Iran is a key member of the group, as is Federico Mayor, the former secretary general of UNESCO who, long before 9/11, extolled the tolerant virtues of "La Convivencia" -- the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in Andalusian Spain from 711-1492.

Whether Obama's hope is justified is indeed the great test for the West in relations with the Muslim world.

Millions of secular Turks who have marched in the streets in the past couple of years worry that the rise of the Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power amounts to "the state being taken over from within" by Islamists who aim to slowly corrode secular rule with a long march through the institutions. In their eyes, it might begin with banning billboards in Istanbul that display women in bikinis or separating boys and girls at the public swimming pool, advance to criminalizing adultery or banning alcohol and one day lead to the establishment of a full-fledged 21st century caliphate.

As always, the nexus of the clash between the West and Islam is the role of women. The Turkish sociologist Nilufer Golë has put her finger somewhat provocatively on precisely what secularists fear might be taken away, but also on what Muslim women are gaining.

"In contrast with the West," she has written, "where the public sphere was first formed by the bourgeoisie and excluded the working class and women, in the Muslim context of modernity women have been the makers of public space. In the Muslim context, the existence of democratic public space depends on the social encounter between the sexes and on the eroticization of the public sphere."

The wearing of the headscarf in universities -- which the AKP has now allowed -- is the flash point of the conflict. To be sure, the headscarf issue signals changing private and public distinctions through the re-entry of religion into the public arena of modern Turkey. But since headscarf proponents argue that it will enhance the opportunities of women in higher education, it also serves as a critique of the idea that only secularism equals modernity.

"Women proponents of the headscarf distance themselves from secular models of feminist emancipation," Gole argues, "but they also seek autonomy from male interpretations of Islamic precepts. They want access to secular education so they can follow new paths in life that don't conform to traditional gender roles, yet they also seek to fashion a new pious self. They are searching for ways to become Muslim and modern at the same time, transforming both."

In short, the established meaning of Islamic veiling is undergoing a radical transformation -- from a symbol of Muslim female submission and seclusion in the private sphere to a badge of public, assertive Muslim womanhood. For Gole, this sign of stigma and inferiority is in the process of being inverted into a sign of empowerment and prestige.

For his part, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the country's chief Muslim modernizer, denies any hidden agenda to overturn secularism. "First of all, a party cannot be Muslim or not Muslim," Erdogan told me in Davos shortly after he first came to power. "A party is an institution. Individuals can be Muslim, Christian or atheist. It is personal."

"Personally, I am a human being who tries to be religious. But my party is not based on any religion. Our identity is that of a conservative democratic political party. We will never have a religious identity. This is a founding principle of our party: We are neither Islamic, nor Islamist. "Our religion, Islam, is infallible. But political parties and their leaders are not--they make mistakes. So, we have to separate the two."

Turkey's most famous writer, Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, brings a novelist's subtlety to the debate. " Turkey is a country of two souls," he told me just after his novel, *Snow*, was published in 2005. "There have been so many authoritarian politicians over the years trying to impose one soul on Turkey, one way of life or mode of being. Some wanted to impose Western secularism by military means; some wanted Turkey to be eternally traditional and Islamic. This approach destroyed democracy in Turkey. It was responsible for all the coups." Let's recognize, pleads Pamuk, "that to have two souls is a good thing. That is the way people really are. These souls are continually in dialogue with each other, sparring with each other and changing each other. To have democracy is precisely to have dialogue between these two souls."

In order to look forward, Pamuk looks back. "This idea of incompatibility of Islam with modernity is an argument that adopts the fundamentalist logic. Liberals, democrats or Western thinkers should stop making general, vulgar and essentialist observations on Islam every time they come up with some new problem, most of which is partly their making, too. The whole history of Islam under the Ottoman Empire was a synthesis of the Book and what was happening in history, in the world. Islam is not a pure thing that exists out there in a vacuum.

"Look at what has happened already in Turkey. We once had an Islamic fundamentalist party which has now converted into a more or less Western-style party whose historic mission is to take Turkey into Europe, and it is backed by the people! This approach is sober and compelling to most Turks today."

As if to prove Pamuk right, the year I saw Prime Minister Erdogan in Davos he hosted a party for whom the guest of honor was Miss World, who was Turkish. She whirled around triumphantly with evident patriotism in her tiara--hair, arms and shoulders uncovered. Erdogan's wife stood by his side, covered with a headscarf. The great irony was that the Miss World contest that year had to be moved to London from Nigeria, where radical Islamists forced it to shut down in an episode the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka memorably referred to as a competition between "beauty and the beast."

But it is precisely such a "union" of civilizations as the one witnessed in Davos that may dash hopes about the importance of a modernized Turkey as a moderating influence on anti-Western jihadists. "Since Kemal Ataturk, the Turks have believed they could become a modern state like the Europeans if they became secular and separated religion and state," Mohamad Mahathir told me when he was still prime minister of Malaysia. "This strategy is not convincing to Muslims, who, after all, are believers. If you say that modernization means secularization, then it will be rejected in the Islamic world."

Surely the new Obama administration has assigned such pivotal importance to Turkey because it is the great experiment in the world today of both non-Western and post-secular modernity. Can it replace the authoritarian modernity imposed by Kemal Ataturk and European-oriented elites with a bottom-up modernization led by a democratically elected regime of Central Asian-Islamic lineage?

Zeynep Karahan Uslu, a vice chairman of the ruling AKP, agrees that Ataturk's project has successfully facilitated material progress and created a Turkish identity. But, "it also entailed a scientific-based positivistic understanding of the world, thus promoting a non-religious Western type of society as the precondition for progress." This created a split between the central elites, who are secular, and the public in the Anatolian periphery, who are devout Muslims. Now, the religious masses are trying to remake modernity in their own image.

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by Nathan GardelsNathan Gardels has been editor of New Perspectives Quarterly since it began publishing in 1985. He has served as editor of Global Viewpoint and Nobel Laureates Plus(services of Los Angeles Times Syndicate/Tribune Media) since 1989. These services have a worldwide readership of 35 million in 15 languages. Gardels has written widely for The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, Harper's, U.S. News & World Report and the New York Review of Books. He has also written for foreign publications, including Corriere della Sera, El Pais, Le Figaro, the Straits Times (Singapore), Yomiuri Shimbun, O'Estado de Sao Paulo, The Guardian, Die Welt and many others. His books include, "At Century's End: Great Minds Reflect on Our Times" and "The Changing Global Order." Since 1986, Gardels has been a Media Fellow of the World Economic Forum (Davos). He has lectured at the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in Rabat, Morocco and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, China. Gardels was a founding member at the New Delhi meeting of Intellectuels du Monde and a visiting researcher at the USA-Canada Institute in Moscow before the end of the Cold War. He has been a member of the Council of Foreign Relations, as well as the Pacific Council, for many years. From 1983 to 1985, Gardels was executive director of the Institute for National Strategy where he conducted policy research at the USA-Canada Institute in Moscow, the People's Institute of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, the Swedish Institute in Stockholm and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Bonn. Prior to this, he spent four years as key adviser to the Governor of California on economic affairs, with an emphasis on public investment, trade issues, the Pacific Basin and Mexico. Gardels holds degrees in Theory and Comparative Politics and in Architecture and Urban Planning from UCLA. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Lilly, and two sons, Carlos and Alexander. Gardels plays the cello on his free time.06.04.2009

Keywords:Islam

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