

SECULARISM IN TURKEY

By Emre Duvenci

“Have you ever noticed that they kind of look like letterboxes?” my aunt quipped with a nervous chuckle, expecting me to laugh along.

A group of women draped in pitch-black burqas that left only their eyes visible had just passed by as we were waiting at the baggage claim.

I said nothing. I was used to it. At least she was getting creative now. She took this silence as a cue to continue.

“How can they even survive in the heat with those rags on?”

The airport was packed. It was the week leading up to the hajj and Muslims from around the world were arriving at Istanbul, waiting for their connecting flights to Mecca. The timing couldn't have been worse. My young cousins were shifting in place—visibly uncomfortable. They were seven and eight years old, too young to even understand what a headscarf was, yet I could tell they were afraid.

My bags finally arrived, and we hustled out of the airport with my aunt leading the way.

Turkey has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, but after one conversation with my family, it does not feel that way. At every dinner, my grandfather prophesizes

about an upcoming Armageddon at the hands of Islam. Much like those in America, he preaches that Sharia Law will take over Turkey if everyone doesn't work to resist its spread. My grandmother, upon seeing news reports that Germany took in over half a million Syrian refugees, grew angry and asked, “What happens when you let pests into your house?”

“They breed, multiply and you get an infestation.”

My grandparents were never religious; they are Muslims in name only, just like the rest of my extended family. Instead, they worship Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the nation's founder who—to the shock of the world—introduced secularism to the ruins of the Ottoman Empire following the end of World War I, creating the republic that persists to this day. Draped across the front of my grandparents' house is a flag bearing Atatürk's face; they want everyone in their neighborhood to know where their loyalties lie and that they are secular Turks. To be religious, to them, is to be uneducated and ignorant, and they cannot have that.

It is this warped meaning of secularism in Turkey that is so problematic. It means a fear of Islam, a fear that Turkey will go down the same path as Iran. It means fear of another Islamic Revolution, spearheaded by the current administration. It means internalized Islamophobia, which has severe consequences, both politically and culturally.

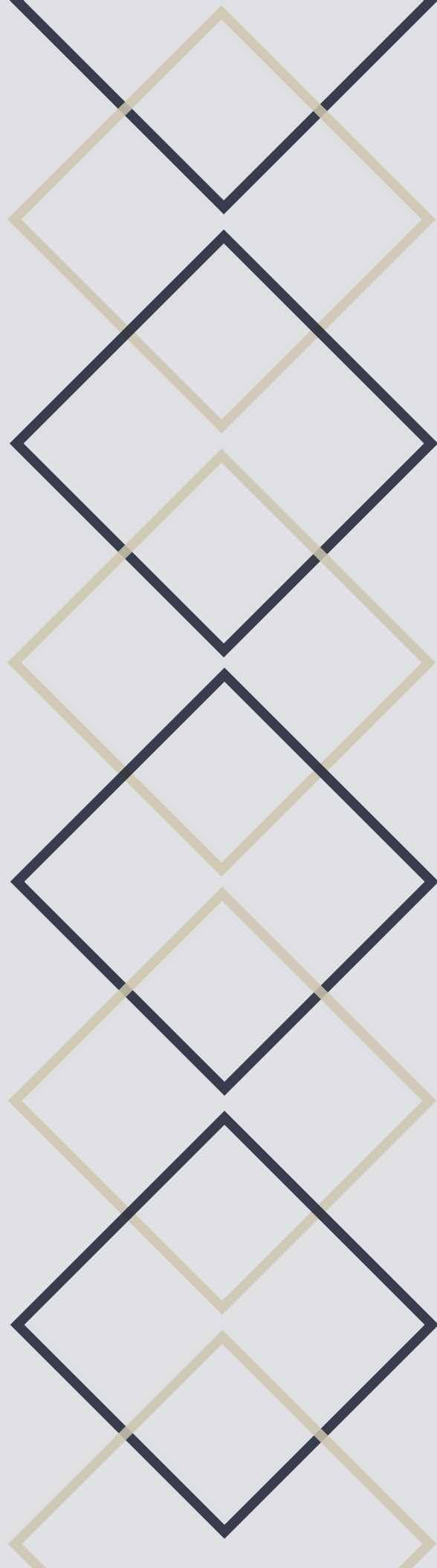
It means a desire to erase Islam.

This has been attempted in the past, beginning with Atatürk himself.

Atatürk sought to distance the new republic from its Ottoman past. He thought that in doing so, Turkey would be more aligned with the West. As part of these efforts, he banned Turks from wearing the fez and introduced a new Latin alphabet to replace the old Arabic-derived script.

Decades later, this concept of modernization has festered even beyond Atatürk's vision. Turkish politicians have been hoping to align Turkey more closely to the West by establishing an economic union with Europe. Even after Turkey joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), politicians wanted greater economic and political benefits that would accompany closer relations with regional powers such as France and England. This ideal—tied to promises of economic prosperity—slowly took hold in the country.

In the 1980s, religious clothing and hijabs were banned in government buildings, public schools, and universities. The policies enacted during this time took many years to undo; for example, the ban on headscarves was ongoing as recently as this past decade. What Turkish politicians did not realize during this time was that they could not make Islam disappear just because they willed it to. Centuries of Ottoman rule ingrained Islamic traditions in Turkish culture; Islam's presence in the nation's language, architecture, culture, and people was too strong to have disappeared that quickly, and these efforts only



energized the religious majority of Turks.

These failed attempts to erase Islam have ushered in the current administration. In the eyes of many, Turkey's failed attempts to join the European Union have ruined the credibility of politicians who support pro-Western policies. This, alongside the villainization of the religious majority, led to the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who promised to return Turkey to its Ottoman-era grandeur. Upon being elected, Erdoğan wasted no time in undoing the policies of his predecessors, to the delight of his electoral base.

Ultimately, Turkish politics resemble a pendulum, with the country swinging back and forth between the two poles. One pole is intense secularism, and the other is not really well-known. Turkey has never been this religious and it is unsure how far Erdoğan will take the country. His efforts have triggered an uproar among non-religious Turks, like those in my family. Demonstrations against his administration happen nearly every day, and this anger even resulted in a military coup just several years ago. The country has become increasingly polarized, and both sides continue to demonize one another. I do not doubt that the country will one day return to its 1970s self; however, I do doubt whether the country will be able to do so peacefully.

If this polarization continues, I can only pray for the future of my home.