

# Sociologist Göle: Turkey the 'other' in Europe's encounter with Islam

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## Yonca Poyraz Doğan

Sociology Professor Nilüfer Göle \*, who has been exploring Europe's encounter with Islam, has said walls fall down as hierarchies disappear in today's world but that proximity and equality lead to anxiety, confrontation and violence rather than dialogue and multiculturalism, making Turkey the "other" for Europeans.

"Natives of Europe fear they no longer feel 'at home' with the invasion of migrants, foreign to their cultural norms," she said, pointing out that migrants wish to make their cultural and religious difference more visible by constructing mosques, wearing headscarves, following halal — religiously permitted — dietary norms, etc.

She said Turkey's role is critical in this world and that US President Barack Obama's speech in Turkey, in which he backed Turkey's membership in the European Union and praised Ankara's central role in achieving major US foreign policy goals, is a sign of recognition and invitation to partnership. "But Turkey needs to be recognized by Europe as well," she said.

Turkey's bid to become a member of the EU is facing obstacles in some European countries, where the public believes overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey does not belong in Europe and that it's culturally different. The opposition to Turkish accession in the EU has intensified during campaigning for European Parliament elections, which were concluded across the 27 EU member countries on Sunday. Proponents of the Turkish accession, including President Obama, say Turkey's membership will be a key step in bridging divides between the Muslim world and the West.

For Monday Talk, Göle also questioned whether Turkey will become the illustration of the "clash of civilizations" thesis and the separation between the Islamic and Western world or a country where there will be space for pluralism and individualism.

"We need to overcome local stress points: religion versus secularism, Kurd versus Turk, nationalist versus pro-European. We need to rise above our own clashes, chase out our demons, learn cultural tolerance and domesticate violence if we want to not miss our appointment with history," said Göle. Excerpts from the interview with Professor Göle are as follows.

**A debate was stirred in Turkey recently after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the Turkish Republic's past policies of "kicking out" citizens of different ethnic origins as a "fascist approach." What is your reaction to this ?**

Turkey has begun to engage in self-criticism. It's good that the prime minister himself is doing this. We have had so many taboos — be it the Kurdish issue, the Turkish-Greek relations regarding the population exchange or relations with the Armenians. There seems to be a need to change the ethnic description of Turkish nationalism. The prime minister's initiative in that regard is a mature approach and it shows that relations with non-Muslim minorities should be re-evaluated. If this initiative moves forward, it will lead to a positive change in mentality. Self-reflection adopted by the civil society, intellectuals, historians and democratic movements is a sign of a maturation, considering the fact that the republic sees itself as a "young" republic that needed to be protected and defended. We can now be self-critical without it meaning the end of the republic is nigh, but rather its maturation and democratization.

**You have been defending the thesis that the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) has been transformed and at the same time is transforming itself. How do you put the development we just discussed in that context ?**

The AK Party has a difficult task. It finds itself as a political party that is transforming Islamic movements that sprang up in the 1980s while playing the game according to the rules of Parliament. Furthermore, it has to reform the country's legal system to prepare it for accession to the European Union. And now there is a third act, which is even more difficult: Turkey as a global actor. Will Turkey be a country with space for pluralism and individualism, where the thesis of a "clash of civilizations" fails or will it be an example of this thesis and the fault line between the Islamic and Western world ?

**Is the Western world united?**

Since the war in Iraq, Turkey has found itself on the border between the two Wests: the United States and Europe. Turkey's rejection of a motion to back the US military's invasion of Iraq represents a turning point. It meant a break from Turkey's role as an unconditional ally of the United States. Yet European countries, although opposed to American politics and war, did not support and embrace Turkey. They failed to see the presence of a vital civil society struggling for peace and its influence on Parliament. Not only that, the democratic process and its procedures were not acknowledged. Furthermore, a Turkish invasion of Iraq was feared. But Turkey distancing itself from American politics has made it gain respectability in the Arab world and enabled it to be recognized as an autonomous actor and a potential mediator. US President Barack Obama's talk in Turkey is a sign of recognition of this new role that Turkey potentially occupies and an invitation to partnership. But Turkey needs to be recognized by Europe as well. Turkey needs to be even more autonomous.

**What would you say about the domestic challenges that Turkey faces in that regard? Can Turkey become an autonomous world player without obtaining a local consensus on divisive issues ?**

Indeed, we need to overcome local stress points: religion versus secularism, Kurd versus Turk, nationalist versus pro-European. We need to rise above our own clashes, chase out our demons, learn cultural tolerance and domesticate violence if we want to not miss our appointment with history.

**Walls segmenting Turkey falling down. As you said, one of the main issues is the Kurds. We saw that the government tried to address the matter before but seemingly got nowhere. Are there reasons to be hopeful this time around ?**

There are many conflicting facts and tendencies. The hope of bringing the Kurdish issue to Parliament has not yet been fully realized. The political realm seems to be more rigid, if not lagging behind the cultural scene. Ajda Pekkan, the icon of white Turkey, and Kurdish singer Rojin singing together in Kurdish was a forceful sign. The walls splitting Turkey up — ethnicities, languages, people — are falling down. The boundaries are becoming porous. But I think the cultural realm is moving ahead, artists are leading more so than politicians. The political domain is open to violent ideological national backlashes.

Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink's tragic assassination is such a backlash on the Armenian issue. Armenians living in Turkey who had to be silent about their past have now lost hope for their security and their future. History does not change in a linear and progressive way. We need to be much more audacious to countervail backlashes, to avoid atrocities.

**Turkey is trying to open up and break its taboos. It is trying to reconcile with its "others." However, when looking at Turkey from Europe, Turkey is the "other." Do you think Europe is going to be able to open up when it comes to Turkey ?**

We live in closer proximity to one another, but without knowing how to frame it. Progressive intensions such as multicultural politics, dialogue between civilizations and universal rights do not capture the attention in our contemporary world. On the contrary, politics of exclusion, a discourse of binary opposition, "us" and "them," clashes, fundamentalisms and violence seem to form the rhythm of our lives. We are living in a world where boundaries and walls fall down, where hierarchies and hegemonies

disappear but where proximity and equality lead to anxiety, confrontation and violence and not automatically to dialogue and multiculturalism. Europe is the site for this new experience. Turkey indeed plays a role of Europe's other against whom Europe is trying to differentiate its identity, search for its spiritual religious roots and address its frontiers.

### **What are the Europeans' fears ?**

Natives of Europe fear they no longer feel "at home" with the invasion of migrants, foreign to their cultural norms. Migrants wish to make their cultural and religious difference more visible by constructing mosques, wearing headscarves, following halal dietary norms and the like. We see in some cases Europeans testing the limits of tolerance of Muslim migrants by films such as "Fitna" in the Netherlands, the cartoon controversy in Denmark and the headscarf ban in France. In Italy, some locals brought in pigs to roam in an area where a mosque was to be constructed. But in Cologne, Europe's biggest mosque is under construction. All these issues provoke confrontation, testing each other's tolerance. We need to see from both sides, not only from the point of view of Muslims or natives of Europe, though giving up violence is a precondition for politics of recognition and reconciliation. The assassination of Dutch intellectual Theo Van Gogh, the producer of the film "Submission," which dealt with issues facing Muslim women, in the streets of Amsterdam in broad daylight exemplified the failure of tolerance and reminded of the issue of violence in Europe. Demanding religious rights and respect for dignity is not enough. The ways Muslims react to what they consider attacks to their dignity, to their beliefs and their norms is paramount. Violence, the threat of violence and intimidation should be openly rejected.

### **Muslim Europeans' experiences differ. Is this why Islam is the most exciting topic in Europe, as you once put it ?**

Muslim Europeans' experiences differ from those of Muslims living in Muslim-majority countries. This brings new issues to the agenda and new questions for imams who had not had to address these issues in their home countries. For example, Muslim girl flirting with a non-Muslim classmate: Is this illicit or not? The debates around the construction of mosques show mutual borrowings and adaptations. The transparency of the architecture is stressed in a European context so that the fear of the unknown or fundamentalism will be dissipated. The esthetic value of the mosque is also a focus of attention so that the mosque will become part of the common landscape and be made part of the patrimony for both Muslims and Europeans.

### **Is it possible for Europeans to learn from the Turkish experience in that regard ?**

It is not easy. We have been seeing ourselves, Turkish Ottomans and Turks for centuries, in the mirror of the West. And now, it is not easy for the self-pride of the Europeans to think about their own society and values in the mirror of Islam. This is also the case with feminism. They think secular feminism is in advance, so they cannot understand the headscarf issue. For now, they can only defend the headscarf in the demarcation of culture. But maybe Muslim women have something different to say in relation to the disciplining body. We cannot explicate today's Islam using old conceptual tools. It is complicated. The headscarf issue is still there between Islam and the West. Yet it is not the "other" in a sense that these girls are totally different. They are much more French or German than the first generation Algerian or Turkish women. They are not the exotic "other," they are not the "erotic, oriental" women. They are within the contemporary world, in the secular spheres of life. Yet they are also religious. This creates much ambivalence.

### **Once you said that an imam's daughter now wants to be a teacher...**

Yes, I said it was not the imam but the imam's daughter who wants to be a teacher with a headscarf that creates a problem in our eyes. It neither follows religious norms nor secular modern imagery. Images are changing and we need to change our vocabulary accordingly.

### **When it comes to these borrowings, which do you think are easier to comprehend and which are more difficult ?**

I have experienced that the “mahram” didn’t travel, but “fitna,” “Shariah,” “fatwa” and “imam” travel easier than “mahram.”

### **What will happen when “mahram” also travels ?**

It might bring a new way of looking at the modern conditions of life in a more critical way. Maybe modern life is overly based on transparency, the exposition of self and an identity anchored in our bodies and appearances. Maybe we need some abstraction. Maybe the “mahram” is the secrecy and abstraction related to the body. It reminds us of more secrecy and a sacred kind of privacy — a kind of protection of the self without being purely in conformity with commercial, global trends and values that we are all surrounded with.

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### **Sources**

Source: Today’s Zaman (Turkey), le 08.06.2009