Europe’s Encounter with Islam: What Future?

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1. French “Exceptionalism”?

I did not expect that the European Union was going to become my area of interest when I moved from Istanbul to Paris in 2001. It is not that the European project did not matter to me until then. It did, in a similar way that it mattered to the majority of my friends and colleagues, Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals, from both secular and religious backgrounds. At that time, our interest in Europe was mainly a Turkey-centered concern, derived from a widely shared expectation and desire that the European Union would provide a political and juridical framework to enlarge and enforce the institutionalization of democratic rights and freedoms in Turkey. In the minds of many progressive intellectuals, Europe stood for a fulfilled prophecy of secular democracy as a stable and fixed point of reference to promote the transformation of other societies. We did not expect Europe to be transformed and shaped by its encounter with the issues related with “Islam.”

I was working on contemporary Islam and its emerging force and visibility in public life and Turkey was my privileged terrain of observation. Turkey provided a site for studying Islamic movements in a politically pluralistic, secularist context. The pluralism implied a field of competing forces among political parties, social movements, and “truth regimes.” Islamism had to compete among these different set of ideas and powers. It was not appropriate therefore to speak of “Islamization” in Turkey in the same way as in other Muslim-majority countries, where Islamism was increasingly taking over political power and gaining influence in all spheres of life and imposing itself as a single truth regime.

The study of Islam in Turkey differed from other Muslim-majority countries that are under monarchic or authoritarian rule. In some respects, because of its secular laws and pluralistic political sphere, the place of Islam in Turkey revealed some similarities with European contexts of pluralism. Islamic claims, such as those of young female students to wear headscarves in university classes, caused a long-term public confrontation with those who were holding to republican principles of secularism and feminism. When the French “headscarf debate,” already started in the 1989, took on new momentum and magnitude in spring 2003, I was struck by the parallels with the Turkish one. The similarities between the two headscarf debates therefore turned my attention to the ways in which French republican values of secularism and feminism were reshaped in relation to Islam and addressed against the claims for visibility of religion in the public sphere.
The Islamic headscarf debate was to be followed in France by an equally passionate nation-wide debate on the Turkish presence in the EU and its consequences on European values and identity. It is by means of these two debates that the presence of Islam (Muslim migrants within Europe and Muslims outside Europe) were brought into the forefront of public concern and carried into the arena of public awareness, meaning that it entered into the area of concern and debate for “all” citizens, not only decision-makers. Islamic veiling and the Turkish candidacy have little in common, sociologically speaking. They follow different historical trajectories; the veiling issue is related to migration, public schools, and gender equality. It is related to new forms of religious agency stemming from contemporary Islamist movements. Turkish membership, on the other hand, is an outcome of a long history of westernization in Turkey. It is the outcome of political determination as well as societal mobilization to conform Turkish society and its future with that of European Union. The agency that underpins Turkish membership is a secular democratic one. The scales are different; Islamic veiling is a concern at a national level, the Turkish candidacy is debated the European scale. But there are also some bridges between the two; Islamic veiling is debated in Turkey as well. The question of Islam is also addressed to Turkey, not only because it is a Muslim-majority country but also because the party in power, the AKP, is related to the Islamist movements of the 1980s that were contesting Western notions of democracy. These movements reveal the tensions between secular and religious orientations but also the ongoing debate and contestation over the definitions of space. The public schools and Europe are becoming “political spaces” to the extent that they become a battleground for the redefinition of the frontiers of inclusion and exclusion and for the contestation of established values. The question of space points to the understanding and creating of “commonness,” whether it is instituted by public schools or the European Union. Creating a common space with those who are external to national and European culture becomes a question, the answer to which goes beyond that provided by the framework of “integration.” The intensity of the debate in the French public sphere illustrates the importance of the question, not only for “outsiders,” Muslims, but also and foremost for Europeans. It is the ways in which these two issues are anchored in public consciousness and become part of the French and/or European public debate that calls for a comparative attention.

To sum up, Islam makes it way in the public arena and public consciousness of European countries. Islam, until recently not a major concern for specialists of “European studies,” at most a policy issue confined to the politics of immigration, moves more and more into the center of research, public, and political agendas. It is difficult today to reflect upon politics in European countries or the European Union without reflecting upon its encounter with Islam.

As a consequence, Europe as a subject matter imposed itself to me, but by a familiar gateway. Rather than having left Turkey and Islam behind me, I was going to experience their presence in Europe. I had the feeling that rather than
merely me making a move to France, France too has made a displacement, coming closer to the issues that were considered until then to be outside Western boundaries, confined to “Middle Eastern” culture and geography. One has the habit of measuring Turkish “laïcité” in the mirror of the French one, and reading the deficiencies and gaps with the original one. In the current situation, one was tempted to observe the French headscarf debate in the mirror of the Turkish one. The didactic aspect of secularism (teaching how to be civilized citizens), its tendency toward authoritarianism and exclusionary politics (if necessary with the help of the military), were well-known attributes of Turkish laïcité. But there was also the feminist alliance with secular republicanism, an intrinsic feature of Turkish secularism that was going to become a salient feature of French secularism in its encounter with Islam. The comparison between the two headscarf debates helps us understand the French one in new ways. One can say that from the Turkish perspective, French laïcité ceases to be an “exception” and the French headscarf debate presents itself as a “déjà vu.” (Methodologically speaking, such a reversal of perspective has important consequences for the social scientific narration of modernity, derived from experiences of the West, supposed to be in “advance” in terms of both temporality and knowledge.)

But in return, it became more and more difficult to translate and communicate the possible meanings of the French debate to the Turkish public. My interlocutors, especially those who were secularist, liberal, feminist, and pro-European, initially found comfort and affinity in the secularist reaction of the French public to ban the headscarf from public schools. They interpreted this radical stance as a proof of attachment to similar notions of laïcité and in addition as a sign of French-Turkish alliance. One found the same celebration among Turkish secularists when the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg decided (November 10, 2005) to support Turkey’s ban on women wearing headscarves in universities. The decision of the European Court marked the end of a judicial battle that started in 1988 when a Turkish student named Leyla Şahin, who was barred from attending Istanbul University medical school because of her headscarf, brought her case to the European Court.¹ The Court decided to uphold Turkey’s ban, on the arguments that Turkey treats men and women equally and that its constitution mandates a secular society. Furthermore, it said that the notion of secularism in Turkey, which is seeking to join the European Union, was consistent with the values underpinning the European Convention on Human Rights.

However, the majority of French intellectuals, feminists, politicians or simple citizens did not think in similar terms to the European Court. And those who were against the headscarf in the public schools of France were also against Turkish membership in the European Union. Only for a minority among them did Turkish secularism seem to matter. This was difficult for Turks to understand. It was difficult for Europe-oriented democrats that a strong public opinion was emerging in France, mobilized around nationalist, secularist, and feminist values, and in contradistinction to migrants and Turks, who were perceived as Muslim “others.”

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One argument one often heard consisted of saying (and/or hoping) that French republicanism, criticized for its ethnic, racial, and religious blindness, was an exception and could not be generalized to other European countries. Although the French were fond of their republican and secularist values, which they considered “French exceptionalism” in the sense that they were willing to see Europe as France universalism written large, French republicanism was ill-adapted not only to deal with a multicultural social reality, but also to deal with new realities of Europe in a global context. The French referendum vote against the European Constitution (May 29, 2005) can be taken as symptomatic of this inward-looking dynamic. Although there was no single reason for the rejection of the constitution, it nevertheless translated the fear and resentment of the French against neoliberal globalization, the enlargement of Europe, the Turkish question, and Muslim migrants – all factors that made French citizens fear that their future, whether economic and political, was no longer in their hands, no longer, in their daily lives, “chez soi.” Dutch society, although not driven by republican ideals, felt similarly. Three days after the referendum vote in France, the Dutch also rejected the European Constitution.

The two countries that voted against the European constitution were those where Islam was most debated publicly. In the Netherlands, multicultural policies have had, in the eyes of many, to cultural separation, and have failed to integrate Muslim migrants into Dutch society. And following Theo Van Gogh’s assassination by an immigrant of Moroccan origin, Dutch public opinion expressed a stronger sense of commitment to and need to defend national values on the lines of Western culture and its sense of freedom.

The German legislative elections (September 2005) have illustrated as well the extent to which issues around Islam, immigration, and Turkish membership were setting the agenda for internal politics. The leaders of the Christian Democratic movement (Angela Merkel and Edmund Stoiber) captured public attention and sympathy by pronouncing their view overtly against Turkish membership in the EU. As in France, politicians who oriented their politics on security issues and taking a stand against Turkish membership (like current Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, but also marginal figures on the nationalist right, such as Phillipe de Villiers, who campaigned with the slogan “non à la turquie”) gained popularity.

It is therefore questionable to see these developments, on the one hand, in continuity with republican tradition, or, on the other, as uniquely French. Rather, we can advance the idea that the claim of universalism underpinning French republicanism is in decline and a politics of nationalism is gaining ground, as in other European countries, in the face of Islam.

The discourse of integration, be it immigrant integration into host countries or Turkish integration into Europe, does not help to frame the two-way relation in this process. The discourse of integration calls for politics that would facilitate assimilation of the newcomers to the host culture and conformity to the national order. But there is no place for understanding the two-way change that is already
underway, shaping both Muslims and Europeans, and reducing the differences between them. It is those social groups and generations that are in Europe, without hope for return, distanced from the national origins of their parents, shaped by the new life experiences, languages, public schools, and suburban districts of European cities, that demand public visibility. Those who are transformed by these experiences claim both difference and citizenship and signal the end of the problematic of “migration.” And second- and third-generation migrants do not identify with their “migrant origins.” The French formula “issue de l’immigration” is felt as a stigma to the extent that they are determined by their parents’ condition. In this respect, Islamic identity, which some of them appropriate voluntarily, marks the distance from their national origins and expresses the desire to escape from the stigma that their parents expressed but also transmitted, such as the Algerian colonial past or first-generation, illiterate Turkish “guest workers.”

The headscarves of young Muslims exemplify the ways in which religious difference is carried into Europe, and thereby ceases to be confined to Muslim-majority nation-states or the “Middle Eastern” region. But in the European context veiling signals a change in the sociological profiles of migrants. The first generation of “immigrant workers” represented the single male figure defined by factory work and temporary immigration. The second generation was perceived through the figure of the “beur,” and named according to age and in relation to Arab culture, the “young male Arab.” Rather than in the streets that one visualized the second-generation migrant youth with demonstrations against racism – “ne touche pas à mon pote”/ “don’t touch my friend” campaigns symbolized by the emblem of Fatima’s hand – but also being in the streets meaning without education and job opportunities. Whereas the “veil” meant to efface “femininity,” it brought migrant girls public attention. The veil symbolizes both the feminization and the Islamization of the migrant population. The school becomes the battleground for religious contestation, but thereby reveals the presence of migrant girls and their greater integration into education compared to the previous generations. The headscarf of the young girls differs from that of the traditional woman of the first generation, of their mothers, mostly illiterate, dependent on home and husband. The daughters speak the language, whether it is French or German, they had access to public education but also to the grammar of self-display and communication in public. If the traditional headscarf of the first-generation Muslims does not create a controversy, it is because it is out of public sight, and does not claim to take a seat in the schools, circulate in urban life, and participate in the public sphere. Veiled girls are therefore much more integrated, and familiar with the culture and grammar of communication in European societies. The Islam they appropriate is not a national one, but a de-nationalized one. Islam becomes a way for them to escape the original nationalities that have little in common with their actual existences. They are re-territorialized and Europeanized, but they come into public existence by turning their differences (small differences) into public visibility, performed in everyday life by religious signs and rituals.
The discourse on migration was based on the idea of the “de-territorialization” of Muslim migrants, their uprootedness, and therefore their greater exposure to alienation, crime, drugs, and all sorts of radicalisms, including terrorism. But it is rather the process of “re-territorialization” of the second generation that engenders conflict and confrontation. Following these lines, one can ask whether French suburban youth riots could spread to other European contexts, to Germany for instance. If we are inclined to answer in the negative, it is not because Turks in Germany are more integrated into German society than Arabs into the French one. The ties between Germans and Turks are less forceful; there is no colonial heritage that binds them through memory but also through language and the education system prior to waves of immigration. In other words, Algerians are French in ways that Turks are not German. Furthermore, Turks are not expected or desired to become German. The German notion of citizenship, based on blood, does not demand the assimilation of the other, but is coupled with a politics of “indifference” or “cultural avoidance.”

What I am arguing here is that if we can speak of French “exceptionalism,” it stems paradoxically not from the distance between French and Muslims, but on the contrary because that distance is much more abridged in France than in other European countries. French republicanism makes a very high promise of integration, even assimilation, that turns today into its contrary. Migrants and Muslims challenge the very places and vectors of integration and social mixing – the public schools, urban habitation, and public life. The public school is the pillar of the formation of citizenship in the republican French sense; it is in the school that individuals are distanced from their local attachments, class origins, regional accents, ethnic differences, and religious convictions in order to embrace a universal knowledge and become French citizens. Apart from the schools, urban life also contributes to learning the bonds of civility. And the “laïc” conception of the public sphere is thought to provide “neutrality”; entering it, particularistic identities, whether religious or ethnic, should be left behind, so that a conversation among equals (but one is not equally naked or stripped of differences) can take place. The presence of Muslims in public schools, in urban life, and in the public debate carries the undesired difference into those spaces that are not only blind to difference, but also puts them out of sight (in the case of suburbs), prohibits them under law (in the case of the headscarf), or labels them as the “other,” the “foreigner” (as in the case of the riots). It is not the universalist claim, but rather the equation of “universal” and “French” that creates a problem today. It is the ways that Western self-presentation still holds to the hegemony over definitions of the “universal.” As Norbert Elias pointed out, the French was the European culture that contributed most to a universal (French and Western) understanding of Civilization as opposed to a German notion of “Kultur.” It is also in France that this equation is most noticeably challenged in the present time, where the encounter between Islam and Europe is displayed in the most dramatic way. The debates triggered by the Turkish candidacy to the EU exemplifies the ongoing and
unresolved encounter between the two, revealing stakes that surpass the Turkish question and touch the European future.

2. Is “Identifying” Europe “Othering” Turkey?

It was a widely shared feeling for Turks that Turkey in joining European Union was to complete, somewhat naturally, the long historical course of Westernization that started in the late nineteenth century. The European ideals had already shaped Ottoman reformist intellectuals, “young Ottomans” and “jeunes Turcs,” formed by the influence of French positivist thought and the Jacobin tradition prior to the Republican era. The foundation of the Turkish nation-state under the leadership of Atatürk in 1923 can be read as a culmination of this process, but a radical step, almost a civilizational shift, turning away from the heritage of the Ottoman Empire to embrace a “new life” and a new nationhood that would make it part of “civilized nations.”

However, from the point of view of European nations, Turkish integration with the European Union, although a process that was welcomed by European politicians in the past and started with the economic “Ankara agreement” in 1963, did not seem to be that natural from the prism of the present-day politics. Turkish candidacy became the most controversial issue with the meeting of the European Council in Copenhagen (12 December 2002) to decide the calendar for opening negotiations with Turkey. The debate started in France, where, unlike in Germany, the Turkish immigrant population is not a major issue. The words of Giscard d’Estaing, former president of the French Republic and president of the Convention on the Future of Europe, initiated the debate on the entry of Turkey by putting “difference” on the public agenda and saying that “Turkey is not a European country, its capital is not in Europe.” It is part of “another culture, another way of life” and its integration will mark “the end of Europe.” His arguments made their way into public opinion, found echoes among politicians, intellectuals, and journalists, independent of their prior political views and differing convictions on other subjects. The Turkish issue ended up reshuffling political alliances and creating a new consensus among those who were until then in opposing camps and blurred the very deep divide between the left and the right in France. The number of articles published in the newspapers, panels on television, public spokespersons, and books on Turkey indicated the intensity and longevity of the debate that was carried into different spheres of public life, opening up a new market for publication and communication, but also for politics. The boundaries of the public incessantly expanded from mass media discussions, newspaper articles, and social scientific conferences to everyday conversations in marketplaces, at dinner tables, and among neighbors or strangers.

The arguments against Turkish membership in the European Union did not remain the same. The Turkish agenda of the 1970s was mainly determined by the violation of human rights, the repression of Kurdish nationalism, the influence of
the military in Turkish political life, the Cyprus discord with Greece, and the official denial of Armenian genocide. But the controversy, although including some of those questions, was not triggered by questions that can be considered as the “Turkish problem file.” On the contrary, the debate started when the Turkish file was getting thinner, when Turkey had started, as observers would put it, “to do her homework,” to resolve some of the problems in her file and hence become eligible for European membership. When Turkey started to get closer to European criteria of democracy, arguments against Turkish membership were articulated in offensive, not to say aggressive tones, to the surprise of pro-European Turkish democrats.

One of the new arguments concerned the question of European territory. Turkey is not part of European geography, let alone history, and threatened, in the eyes of many, the unity of Europe in geographical terms, representing an unlimited enlargement of frontiers. “Why not Morocco? Why not Russia?,” were among the arguments used to denote the “absurdity” of Turkish membership. Including Turkey would mean expanding the European borders towards the East, and becoming neighbors with those unwanted, risky countries. Another line of argument concerned economic factors, and basically the impoverishment of Europe by the recent newcomers to Europe. Turkey appeared as a burden that Europe would not be capable of including into its system (economic but also political – Turkish members in the European parliament would outweigh other countries) without a high cost. Above all, Turkey was not a small country, and bringing more than 50 million “Muslims” into Europe would make a difference.

The debate on Turkish membership became a concern for all when it started to become a concern for definitions of Europe’s frontiers, values, and future. Turkey became a catalyst, but also the “other” for self-definition of what it was to be defined as a European. In that sense, “othering” Turkey became a way of “identifying” Europe. The need for an “alterité” to define European identity was integrated into the political discourse of those skeptical of Turkish membership in Europe. Turkey entering Europe would mean, as a Dutch commissioner for the European Union (Frits Bolkestein) argued prior to entry talks with Turkey, forgetting 1683, when the siege of Vienna was lifted and the Ottoman army was defeated. (One legend is that the “croissant” was invented in Vienna to celebrate the defeat of the Turkish siege, as a reference to the crescent on the Turkish flags). Hence the memory of the past entered into present-day cleavages and controversies. The objection of Austria, until the very last minute, to opening negotiations with Turkey (3 October 2005) had something to do with these memories. (Austria agreed to shelve her objections on the condition that Croatia also begin membership talks.)

The opening of talks with Turkey is an important date, but it brings to an end neither the public debate nor the process of integration, which will take decades. One should notice an important shift that has occurred in European politics and transferred the power of decision-makers to opinion-makers. The issues related to
the European Union, formerly in the hands of Eurocrats and resolved in Brussels, moved to national publics and became part of a societal debate. The idea of popular sovereignty that is extended and juxtaposed from nation-state politics to the EU illustrates this shift. The idea of a democratic Europe came to mean building Europe from below – whence the necessity of consulting the people, and therefore a consensus on the need for referenda, whether on the European constitution or Turkish membership. The idea of a referendum on Turkey, as one might expect, is mostly defended by opponents of the Turkish candidacy, counting on the popular vote for its rejection in ten years time.

3. The Working of the European Perspective in Turkey

Ten years time seems sufficiently long for Turks to transform their society. In ten years time, according to some Turkish democratic intellectuals, Turkey will achieve a level of democratic stability such that rejection in the European countries will not have a drastic effect. In a way, the optimists think that the presence of European prospects would have fulfilled their role. Such an argument might sound like wishful thinking or a way of de-dramatizing European anti-Turkish attitudes, but it also illustrates the confidence of Turkish intellectuals in the impact of the European perspective already at work in Turkey.

The European perspective forced Turkey to introduce a reform of the republican definition of citizenship in order to be in harmony with democratic and pluralistic definitions of ethnic, political, religious, and individual rights. Turkish republicanism as the nation-state ideology has been founded on two pillars: secularism and nationalism, referred to as Kemalism (the name of the founding father of the Republic, Kemal Ataturk). But these principles were coupled with monoculture definitions of society, giving rise to anti-democratic interpretations of these principles, namely authoritative secularism and assimilative nationalism. The working of the European project in Turkey meant dismantling the authoritarian and assimilative nature of republicanism.

Four concrete examples illustrate the ways in which Turkish society is overcoming authoritarian tendencies, breaking down taboos, and getting onto a similar wavelength, not without inner tension and confrontation, with European democracies.

1. The first tension in the Turkish political system is between authoritarian secularism and democracy. We can speak of a vicious circle that can be seen in many other Muslim countries that were engaged with values of secularism and modernity, but at the expense of democratic pluralistic politics. Secular reforms were implemented in the 1920s, mainly by means of single-party authoritarian rules. An opening of a democratic space usually profits to those who were excluded, in this case Muslim groups searching for public recognition and political representation. To protect the secular state and the principles of the Republic,
the military does not mind putting democracy into brackets. (Algerian parliamentary elections in 1992 were a dramatic example of such a dilemma; The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won, but the army dissolved the parliament and cancelled the elections in order to prevent Muslim fundamentalists having access to power.) The Turkish army sees itself as the guardian of the secular Republic and therefore occupies a central position in the political life. For democratization, there is a need to create a consensual “secularism,” and not an exclusionary, authoritarian one. This is possible only if there is a democratic space, shared by religious and secular – the former giving up the absolutism of the religious truth-regime, the latter giving up its claims of hegemony over society. The party of Justice and Development, the AKP, which had Islamic roots, won the 2002 general elections by democratic means and came to power in Turkey. We can speak of a building-up of a democratic consensus between secular and religious publics through an interactive process that transformed both parties. In that respect, what Jürgen Habermas describes as a cognitive precondition for a religious-secular dialogue, is engaged in Turkey. Furthermore, rather than a mere discursive debate between two supposedly fixed identities, the interaction transforms and opens up a new intermediate spaces for self-definition and democracy.

In spite of the ongoing cleavages and conflicts between hard-line Islamists and secularist establishment, Turkish society has experienced, especially during the last two decades, a “fall of the wall” that separated and divided two Turkeys; one composed of, educated, urban, westward-looking secularist upper and middle classes (“white turks”) and the other of the faith-driven lower-middle classes (“black turks” – Ismet Ozel, a well known poet, has considered Muslims in Turkey as “Turkey’s blacks”) from Anatolian towns. The course of upward social mobility changed the life-trajectories of many of those belonging to the latter group (turned them “grey”), who got access to higher education in the 1960s with emigration to the cities, profited from new market opportunities that expanded in the 1980s, and gained political power with the victory of the Party of Justice and Development. The thinning of the wall between the two faces of Turkey brought different publics and cultural codes in close contact and interaction, albeit with intense conflict, yet transforming the mutual conceptions of Muslim and secular publics and limiting the latter’s claims of hegemony. During the last two decades, the frontiers between the two publics became more porous and leading spokes-persons of Muslim, leftist, and liberal movements engage in public debates, participate in round-tables, but also cross the borders and address each others’ publics. Well known public intellectuals from the leftist movement started to write in conservative religious or radical Islamic newspapers (Zaman or Yeni Safak), while those from Islamic movement turned their attention to secular publics and media (as in the case of Ahmet Hakan, the popular anchorman of Islamic local television, who became a columnist in the secular mainstream daily Hurriyet). Such success-driven trans-public crossings were unthinkable in the 1980s; they helped establish bridges of dialogue between divided publics, and created a new
mental space for linking the two faces of Turkey, secular and Muslim, in a more interactive way that generates transformation and not mere hybridism.

The democratic sphere gained momentum to the extent that the polarization between the secularist and Islamist publics was played down, leading to an intermediary space of debate and representation. The European prospect reinforced this democratic momentum and created a new political agenda of reform. The mobilization of human rights movements in civil society, the formation of a public opinion in favor of these reforms, and the determination of the government and the political classes all culminated in a series of reforms that were passed by parliamentary vote in 2002–2003 to harmonize the Turkish legal system with the Copenhagen criteria.

2. One major example is the abolition of the death penalty, a widely shared societal value in Europe, in contradistinction with American society. The Turkish parliament voted in favor of the abolishment of death penalty on 2 August 2002, a first in a Muslim country. More than expressing the desire to embrace European values or just to please Europeans, as cynical observers would think, the abolition of capital punishment deepened the political divide and confrontation with extreme-right nationalists because it came to be related with a more fundamental problem, namely the Kurdish question. At the time the death penalty was discussed, the leader of the Kurdish movement was in prison facing a death sentence. The death penalty would not have gained the prominence it has had if not for the fact that it concerned the fate of jailed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan, responsible for terrorist acts. In spite of the nationalists’ objections, the law passed – a victory of reformists against nationalists. Turkey skeptics dismissed these reforms as “paper” and “cosmetic,” that is superficial.

3. The third crucial moment came when the Turkish parliamentary vote (on March 1, 2003) denied the US its request to attack Iraq from Turkish soil. Such a rupture with American policy was unexpected and interpreted as a turning-point in Turkish-American relations. There was no majority vote, and the outcome of the parliamentary vote represented the divide that many Turkish citizens felt inside themselves: they thought the war was unjust, but they feared harming the alliance with the United States. Turkish anti-war demonstrations were on the same wavelength as the European peace movements. They were in favor of peace rather than religious fraternity. Turkey, long-term ally of the United States and candidate for membership in the European Union, found herself in the divide between the two. The European powers did not read the Turkish refusal as a sign of sharing the “European peace sensibility” or a maturation of democracy. The Arab intellectuals did; Turkey gained respectability in their eyes to the extent that it articulated a decision autonomous from the US and relied on public opinion and parliamentary power to say no to the American policy. Europeans, however, missed the democratic aspect of the decision. They suspected Turkey of a hidden agenda to invade
the North of Iraq and prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state. My point here is not to judge the plausibility of such arguments, but to point out the failure of European politics to hear and support the emerging democratic voices in Turkey.

4. The fourth and last topic concerns the Armenian question – still a major taboo for Turkish nationalism. The official view of the past is based on the suppression and denial of the 1915 genocide that created a sort of forced short-memory and diffused amnesia for generations of Turks. Therefore there are two aspects of the problem. One question is remembering the past and the second is developing and expressing points of view that are independent of the official one. The choice of words to label the events – deportation, ethnic cleansing, massacres, or genocide – is becoming a battleground for the public debate that is beginning, albeit under nationalist pressure and juridical intimidation. The debate has been initiated by few Turkish intellectuals; historians, including those of the Armenian community, who challenged the ideological version of the events, defying the taboos of Turkish nationalism and exploring new ways of relating to the trauma of the Armenians and developing a new narrative on the historical past. In this respect, the Istanbul conference signaled a new period. The conference brought together Turkish historians who wanted to pursue a free discussion of Turkey’s Armenian past. Despite pressures and postponement, it was at last held at Bilgi University in September 2005. It marked a collective effort to break away from official discourse and to confront the Turkish nationalism with its own past.

Alongside these historically constructed points of view that challenge the established ideology, there are also voices and images that bring forth the past memory. I think of the post cards exhibition in Istanbul illustrating the lives of Armenians all over Turkey prior to the events. The autobiographical book written by a woman human rights lawyer, Fethiye Çetin, “My Grandmother” (“ænænem”) and published in Istanbul in 2004, is another breakthrough in public consciousness. She tells the story of her discovery of her grandmother as Armenian. The writer follows her grandmother’s life, gives an account of the past, breaks the silence on the subject, but also gives many other people the possibility of remembering and discovering their Armenian ascendance.

The presence of European perspectives in Turkey unties the knots of identity as it dismantles national myths. It is not a linear, peaceful, once and for all process; it is an ongoing process and battle. In the eyes of many hard-line nationalists and secularists (“laïcards”), Europe, in forcing Turkey in the direction of democratization and demilitarization, endangers the stability of the country, opening up a gate for the escalating demands of Kurdish nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and the Armenian diaspora.

I am trying not to argue for a problem-free society but on the contrary to illustrate, by means of concrete but significant cases, the ways in which Turkish
society names the problems it faces, tries to bring into public awareness those subjects that were kept out of sight, repressed, or forgotten, and frames them politically. The honor crimes follow the same political pattern: with the help of feminist organizations, the issue is brought to public attention, calling for new legislation. It is rather the “way” of politicizing the issues, carrying them from silenced arenas (whether by shame or repression) and giving them plurality of voice and visibility in the public sphere that I describe the existence of a democratic pattern.

In France, a debate on the legitimacy of Turkish membership, as I have argued, started the moment Turkey accomplished many of the requirements, getting closer to the standards set by the EU. Once again one should note that it is the proximity, the encounter between the two, which is the source of conflict and controversy. Turkish membership triggered an anxiety of loss and a desire for boundary maintenance. The question of geographical frontiers, civilizational belonging, religious differences, and past memories entered into the debate as a constellation of insurmountable differences, setting a new agenda. Europe, until then left in the hands of Eurocrats, made its way into public debate, recomposing the political and intellectual arena independent of left-right, secular-religious, liberal-republican, feminist-conservative divisions. Identifying Europe meant “othering” Turkey. Throughout these debates, Europe is constructed as an identity defined by shared history and common cultural values rather than as a project for the future. It is in contexts outside the core countries of Europe (for instance in Spain, Portugal, and Greece) that Europe appears as a project and has the power to induce democratization. In Turkey, where Europeanness is not part of a “natural” historical legacy, it is appropriated voluntarily as a political project, as a perspective, promising a democratic frame for rethinking commonness and difference.

In sum, Turkish candidacy reveals the difference between Europe as a project and Europe as an identity. For the European countries there is not difference but continuity between the two: the EU is the European identity writ large. Secondly, the Islamic presence in Europe reveals the tensions between the universalism of Europe and the Judeo-Christian legacy. The European claims for universalism and its limits are tested and defied by Turkish membership as well as by Muslim migrants within Europe.

4. Europe as a Novel Experience?

Islam has become an agenda-setting issue both for national politics in Europe, and for the European Union itself. Obviously, the intersections between Europe and Islam are not a new phenomena; a long and deep history of exchanges, wars, colonization, and waves of immigration has profoundly shaped the relations between Muslims and Europeans, including their traumas. And yet there is something novel in the contemporary encounter between the two, including the ways the old memories come out in present-day discourses.
In the present day, there is a two-way, interactive relation between Islam and Europe and it is the proximity between the two that engenders conflict. Neither Islam nor Europe presents itself as a homogeneous entity. Rather than stressing internal differences, I have emphasized the processes of interaction through which both are transformed. It is the problematic zones of contact between the two that I wanted to bring to attention. The frontiers are zones of both contact and separation between different neighbor populations. But precisely because the European experience means the weakening or effacement of these frontiers, the process can be understood as “interpenetrations” (the title of my book in French) between Muslims and Europeans. This does not imply a peaceful and non-violent process. The asymmetry of desires underpins the encounter between the two and fuels emotions; passion, fear, irrationality, anger, and hate become the ingredients of the debate and the conflict.

Although the Islamic headscarf, Turkish membership, or more recently suburban riots in France are radically different in scale, encompassing national, European, and local scales, originating from different historical trajectories of colonization and Westernization, and present different political problems, each carries issues that were considered external and foreign to the Western site, into the center of their public agendas. Muslims make their way onto the European public agenda in different ways; whether they claim their religiosity (as in the case of the headscarf movement), European membership (as in the case of Turkish candidacy), or their citizenship (as in the case of suburban youth). By means of religious signs or secular riots, Muslim migrants make their way to the center of public attention. It is by performing their differences that they become “visible” and disturbing to the public eye. They “force” their entry into spaces that were reserved to Europe’s “white” citizens. Muslims in Europe imply the breakdown of boundaries that used to maintain the civilizational, national, or urban divide.

The novelty of the experience originates from the very location of this encounter. 1. Europe is where the conversation and the confrontation take place in proximity to each other, and in the present. The comfort of geographical distance is lost. In this respect, the “old” Europe is becoming a site of novel experience where we can no longer speak of two distinct and separate civilizations in time and in space. 2. Neither can it be traced solely at the political level of decision-makers, governments, and nation-states. It becomes a public affair, a concern for all. But publicity also refers to an emerging problem, a process that carries ideas and opinions from the private, interior, personal realm into an outspoken, shared public one. In that sense, we can speak of a growing public awareness of the Islamic presence in Europe. 3. The encounter between Europe and Islam is a two-way relation that transforms both sides, both European and Muslim self-presentations. 4. The project of the European Union brings and reinforces a transnational aspect of connectivity. 5. And last but not least, the naming of self and other becomes a crucial and decisive matter that will define the outcome of this process. The ways in which Europe and Islam will connect to each other, create hyphenated identities or

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boundaries of separation, will be decisive for the future of “European Islam,” “French-Muslims,” or “Euro-Turks.”

NOTE

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1. The European Court of Human Rights was set up in Strasbourg in 1959 to deal with alleged violations of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights. Recognition of the right of individual application was, however, optional and it could therefore be exercised only against those states which had accepted it. Turkey ratified the right for individual applications from Turkish citizens to the European Commission of Human Rights in 1987; the compulsory judicial power of the European Court of Human Rights was recognized in 1989. Turkey has the highest number of applications to the Court.

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