Some scholars, such as Graham Fuller, tend to read the current experiment in Turkey as the successful political integration of an Islamic movement into a democracy. Several facts support such an interpretation. Although the JDP [Justice and Democracy Party] leadership denies its Islamic background and claims to be a conservative democratic party, nonetheless, the party did emerge out of the ashes of the Welfare [Refah] and the Virtue [Fazilet] parties that were closed down by the constitutional court on charges of being a forum for and proponent of anti-secular activities.

Moreover, the majority of JDP’s deputies are observant Muslims in their daily lives. For instance, their spouses continue to wear headscarves, which are banned in public offices, state ceremonies, and universities because they are regarded as a threat to Turkey’s secular character. The religious observance of JDP’s members poses several questions. Is the JDP an Islamic party? Is it possible for an ex-Islamic movement to become a-Islamic or un-Islamic? Is the commitment of the JDP’s members to religious values in their personal life sufficient to label the party Islamic? When does a movement or a party become or cease to be Islamic? Even if the party’s administration denies any connection with political Islam, can we still consider the party to be Islamic?

Alternatively, one may argue that JDP’s denial of being an Islamic party is simply a compromise between the state and the JDP. The party, as the argument goes, is free to govern the country as long as it stays within Turkey’s strictly proscribed constitutional framework and ignores many of its conservative constituency’s religious demands. This alternative interpretation further complicates the issue and raises following question: Is the JDP, rather than being the success story of an Islamic movement that has adapted to a democratic and secular environment, an example of the...
Turkish system’s ability to transform and domesticate political Islam to the extent that it denies its Islamism and even its Islamic roots?

Despite popular arguments to the contrary, it is very problematic to use Turkey as a model for Islamic democracy. Moreover, the Turkish experiment cannot be recreated in other Muslim countries, for there are several unique features (also mentioned by Cohen) that differentiate Turkey from other Muslim countries. At the core of the Turkish experiment are four formative factors that dominate its political landscape. First, Turkey has a very powerful tradition and history of a state structure and a state-centric political culture in comparison with other Muslim countries. Historically, the Ottoman imperial system was not in conflict with Islam; rather, Islam was subordinated to the state’s interests. Second, there is no legacy of colonialism or confrontation with the West. Consequently, Turkish political thought (secular or Islamic) was never suffused with anti-European ideas, but always remained open to diverse ideas and lifestyles. Third, the Turkish military was the founding institution of the republic and has a doctrine and mission for modernizing and secularizing Turkey. It never collaborated with outside forces and did not allow any ideological clique to hijack its project. The military remains a more prestigious and respected institution than any religious organization.

Fourth, Turkey is not a rentier economy, but rather a tax-based market economy with a growing middle class. Islam has been the transmission belt between state and nation, and the diversified economy has provided the necessary context for the pluralization of Islamic movements. The rigid interpretation of secularism failed to confront the fact that Turks are religious beings and that Islamic mores are the building blocks of their personal evolution and everyday life. In order to live a purposeful life in the Turkish context, one needs to have a cognitive map rooted in Turko-Islamic civilization. Esposito aptly argues that each country has its own democratization process and that there is no single pattern of relationship between political culture and democracy. Graham Fuller’s reading of Erdogan as a “vital figure in the global evolution of political Islam” is rather naïve. Ruling under the shadow of military interventions and in the context of Turkey’s political and cultural particularities, Erdogan represents only the transformation of a Turkish Islamic movement, and certainly not the imagined “global political Islam.”

Moreover, Turkey itself has not persuasively solved significant problems regarding political Islam integration’s into its system by accommodating it; rather, it has used extra-judicial means to transform political Islam
to the point where the movement seeks refuge in denying its past and reacting very negatively when it is called “Islamic” or “Muslim.” As such, the JDP refuses to define itself as an Islamic or a Muslim party.

I would argue that if an Islamic political movement actively opposes the articulation of arguments on the basis of Islamic values, it is no longer Islamic. A movement is Islamic to the extent that it makes political claims and seeks legitimacy on Islamic grounds. In the case of Turkey, we see such a process – the process of post-Islamism, or the shift from the politics of identity to the politics of services (*hizmet partisi*). One sees the realization/materialization of liberal politics in Turkey in the sense that political movements are not engaged in the politics of identity, which tend to be conflict-ridden and confrontational, but rather in the politics of services based on compromise and cooperation. As a result, a new social and political contract is evolving, one premised on neo-liberal economic and political values. This can be seen as the normalization of Turkish politics, since it hints at the country’s positive integration into many of the macro-trends taking place on a global scale. The JDP, being the product of these transformations, is not a party of identity, but rather a party that strives to provide better services. It does not develop or articulate any claims on the basis of Islam or other sources of identity, but acts as an agent of the country’s integration into neo-liberal economic and political spaces.

Going back to our main question, when and under what conditions a movement ceases to be Islamic, I would argue that this occurs if it abstains from articulating policies based on Islamic identity and, instead of using Islamic justifications, employs public reason. Based on the JDP’s actions, it is possible to conclude that the Islamic political movement has helped to consolidate democracy by offering Turkey’s marginalized groups an alternative avenue for political participation. Yet this positive role is very much an outcome of expanding opportunity spaces and restraining the military-legal institutions. In large part, this became possible through the actions and the trend-setting role played by a new and rising Anatolian bourgeoisie, whose members have refused to support confrontational policies. This democratic bargaining between the state and the JDP forced the latter to give up any search for governmental “hegemony” and to accept EU-oriented democratic norms. Turkey’s Islamic groups, more than the secularists, reluctantly supported this new democratic bargain because they intrinsically understood that it was the only way for them to come to power.

These European Union (EU) norms helped to domesticate and force not only the state, but also the anti-systemic actors, to change their perspectives
and strategies and to adopt EU norms as the point of reference to create a new social contract. When the EU gives a possible accession date, how the JDP will react is not very clear. Although some of its members are in the process of inventing some sort of post-EU platform, other broad-based programs that would appeal to the JDP’s past supporters have yet to be articulated. There is still a major chance for Turkish voters to return to the identity-based parties of the past, having used the JDP “like a streetcar” to reach their desired destination, namely, EU membership, and to cleanse the political landscape of corrupt politicians. I believe this is the biggest question facing Turkish politics in the near future. In other words, has politics in Turkey really shifted from the politics of identity to the politics of issues/services, or is the case of the JDP simply a temporary development, if not an anomaly?

The Source of the Silent Revolution: The New Bourgeoisie

The Turkish case challenges two dominant Orientalist theses: that Islam and democracy, as well as capitalism and Islam, are incompatible. In the case of Turkey, one sees the evolution of an Islam that is both entrepreneurial and capitalist-oriented. The rise of a Muslim bourgeoisie is a challenge to the Weberian reading of the relationship between Islam and capitalism as one of incompatibility and antagonism. By “Muslim entrepreneurs,” I mean those pious individuals who identify Islam as their identity and formulate their everyday cognitive map by using Islamic ideas and history to vernacularize (Islamicize) modern economic relations that promote market forces and cherish the neo-liberal project.

Political Islam is most often depicted as the enemy of the West and the western values of capitalism, democracy, human rights, and modernity. Lerner’s image of “Mecca vs. Mechanization” has been replaced with Barber’s “Jihad vs. McWorld.” The case of Turkey can be used to challenge and question this dichotomous mode of thinking: It not only indicates the compatibility between Islam and democracy as well as between Islam and capitalism, but also shows how new waves of globalization have opened new spaces for the evolution and consolidation of Islamic economic actors. The Islamic movement in Turkey, which is led by a counter-elite with a counter-project, is progressive in ways that challenge the state ideology (Kemalism) and the secular bloc (military-bureaucracy-capitalist) and also critiques “traditional/folk” Islamic ways of doing and thinking. The neo-
liberal project produced new Islamic actors who, in turn, shaped Islamic discourse and practices. The market’s expansion, the middle class’ increasing role, and a strengthened civil society have had a profound impact on Islamic actors and their identities.

To understand the JDP’s origins and policies, one has to explore not only the sociopolitical context of the new Muslim actors (i.e., the Muslim bourgeoisie), but also its identity, politics, and relationship with Islamic political groups. It is very important to study the role of Islamic bourgeoisie, because it provides the financial means to develop the Islamic movement through its charities, television stations, radios, newspapers, and, as such, has boosted its social status.

Who are these actors? What are their identity and politics? How do they shape the JDP’s orientation? What is the role of the Muslim bourgeoisie in the fragmentation, and even in the end, of Islamism? The Islamic movement is not shaped by the shantytowns surrounding large cities in Turkey, but rather by rising social groups in terms of wealth and education. These are the groups, especially the Muslim bourgeoisie, that are fuelling the locomotive of Islamization regarding consumer patterns and that are the vanguard of Turkey’s recent democratization.

The Muslim bourgeoisie evolved out of the state’s neo-liberal economic policies that, due to deregulating and opening the Turkish economy, created conducive economic conditions and emerging transnational financial networks. Its members have also benefited from the local governments of the Welfare party, especially after 1994. This new actor is both a cause and an outcome of the neo-liberal economic policies of Turgut Özal, the former reformist prime minister and president who died in 1993. The symbiotic relationship between the state and the large Istanbul-based capitalists had been based on both parties’ agreement over secularism and Kemalism. The emergence of an Anatolian-based Muslim bourgeoisie ran counter to the existing economic and cultural alliance between the state and the Istanbul-based capitalists.

These Muslim entrepreneurs consist mostly of first-generation college graduates of an Anatolian-based petty bourgeoisie whose members benefited from Özal’s neo-liberal economic policies, which increased their social mobility and thus enabled them to establish their own medium- and small-size firms. They are the first generation of an urbanizing economic elite that continues to maintain strong ties with Anatolia’s provincial towns and villages. Most of them were born and raised there, settling in the big cities only after graduating from college.
They were first introduced to Islamic values in their provincial towns and villages and later spent several years in university dormitories, mostly run by Nurcu or Nakshibendi Sufi orders. In addition, they objectified Islam as an alternative project and became conscious Muslims with a clear and concise notion of what constituted an Islamic identity. Thus, a closer study indicates that most of the members of MÜSİAD (The Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen), a conscious Muslim businessmen’s association, appear to have come from a conservative Muslim social environment with a history of anti-establishment discontent. They were – and still are – critical of state subsidies for the Istanbul-based business class, and have always been disgruntled with Turkey’s history of close state connections with big business.

The state mostly excluded and marginalized this petty bourgeoisie by following import-substitution policies and, from the foundation of the Turkish Republic onward, always favoring a secular-oriented big city-based bourgeoisie as the carrier of its modernization projects and purveyor of its prescribed lifestyles. Most members of this new urbanizing economic elite became involved in the growing textile and construction trade. Eventually, services, transportation, and tourism became important fields of activity. Most of these small- and medium-sized firms are family owned and maintain family structures with conservative religious values. In other words, even though they all come from a traditional petty bourgeoisie background and a culturally marginalized milieu, they used education and the new economic and political conditions of the post-1980s to develop entrepreneurial and organizational skills so that they could reposition themselves as Anatolia’s new economic actors in order to modernize their cities and lifestyles through Islamization.

They identified the state’s interventionist policies and its ties to big business as being responsible for Turkey’s uneven economic development and socioeconomic problems, as well as for excluding a large sector of the petty bourgeoisie. These new actors mobilized their Islamic identity, which the Kemanlist elite had marginalized and identified as the cause of Turkey’s backwardness, to challenge state policies and form a new organization to articulate their policies. In other words, Islamic identity was not a cause, but rather was used as the lubricant to prime the workings of market forces and as an instrument of carving out their share in the market. The transformative history of MÜSİAD is the history of this new urbanizing economic elite, which is steeped in Islamic ethics and networks. Thus, entrepreneurial Islam is the outcome of this new elite that cri-
tiques the Istanbul-based secularist elite and the traditional Islamic conception of isnaf (small merchants).

The expansion of economic opportunity not only facilitated the evolution of more moderate political forces, but also enhanced civil society and private education. These autonomous economic groups supported a number of cultural projects, along with new television stations, radio channels, and magazines.

In conclusion, the JDP defines itself as being outside of political Islam. It constantly reminds itself of what it is not: an Islamic party. However, its repressed identity occasionally reemerges. Inevitably, the party’s identity is shaped both by what it wants to forget and what it wants to become: It reflects a conflict between Islamism and the new rubric of conservative-democracy, the term used by party leaders to demonstrate that they are not Islamic. The party has particularly exploited the EU membership project to demonstrate that it is not Islamic in either domestic or foreign policy. Conforming to the Copenhagen criteria is an aspect of this identity-building.

Endnotes

1. Graham E. Fuller, “Turkey’s Strategic Model: Myths and Realities,” The Washington Quarterly 27, no. 3 (summer 2004): 51-64. Daniel Pipes also argues that: “The Justice and Development Party in Turkey is very different from the Taliban in its means, but not so different in its ends. If the party gained full control over Turkey, it could be as dangerous as the Taliban were in Afghanistan.” Washington Institute, Policy Watch, 746 (10 April 2003), www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2003/746.htm.