

## **Istanbul - voyage report with reflection**

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My German friend Sara and I arrived in the middle of the night at Sabiha Gökçen Airport and went by bus to Harem. Not knowing if our friends would be there to pick us up, we were a little bit nervous - at least without reason: Our Turkish friend Volcan and our Slovenian friend Rado, actually working and living in Istanbul as a social volunteer, appeared as punctual as Germans. They were waiting for us, to bring us to our first base: the apartment of the volunteers on the Asian side. This night we would stay there, because the ferries stop crossing the Bosphorus at approximately 1 o'clock in the morning.

The first impressions I could get from Istanbul were through the window of the taxi: I could see the silhouettes of the mosques and the wooden houses which I had read about in Pamuk's descriptions of his favourite city. The night was quiet and peaceful; we were at one of the most traditional neighbourhoods, which is very different from Taksim, the quarter with the highest density of night-life in Istanbul, where we should stay our next nights.

Rado gave us very warm welcome in his house, offering us fresh water and two nice beds. We talked with him till the morning hours about his experience in Istanbul. Asking what he thinks about Istanbul he answered, that he would like to stay there for the rest of his life. The certainty in his voice by saying this surprised me. Even encountering a lot of problems in his work and in integrating in Turkish society – f.ex. his neighbours didn't accept the volunteers, because in their eyes they should follow a life reigned by Islamic rules – his passion for social and cultural work and his will to make changes in the cultural educational system in Turkey seemed to be stronger and to give him all his motivation.

We would have talked much more, if the imams wouldn't have started singing loudly from minarets of any direction at five o'clock in the morning. This was the sign to finally go to bed and try to sleep before the sunrise.

After a good Turkish breakfast with strong brewed Chai, we were ready to adventure ourselves in Istanbul's Asian side. Climbing down the hill to the seaside, my first impressions were full of contrasts: From poor traditional fishermen to modern and expensive fish restaurants for the upper classes, from centuries-old mosques to very modern buildings side by side, from all over covered women walking behind her husbands to young styled couples

walking arm in arm on the pavement... What mostly took my attention were the different ways of women's being: From women with long black burqas; over women with scarves and long coats covering their female silhouettes; to women with scarves and jeans or skirts, combined with attractive shimmering tights and pumps; and last but not least, women with a more European look, with fancy hairstyle and feminine cloths. This very different ways of female expression with scarf and without scarf - was the subject I would come to explore during my staying in Istanbul.

Occasionally the scarf subject was one of the most discussed subjects in the media at that time: The opposition had just opened a procedure to forbid the AKP, the islamic-conservative party of Prime Minister Erdoğan with majority in parliament. The opposition justified their course of action with the argument that the AKP were going against the kemalist law, which prohibits scarf in public buildings. The AKP wanted to allow the scarf in universities again, arguing with religious freedom in social and professional life of women. The opposition interpreted this as an act towards an anti-laique society and supposed that Erdoğan has hidden plans for an islamistic Turkey. So the scarf – once again - was one of the most discussed issues and the people of Istanbul seemed to be divided into two groups:

1. One group, who believes in AKP's idea, that women with scarves should not be discriminated in their individual right of religious expression. This also means that they should have the same access to university and to a professional life as women without scarves.
2. Another group, who believes that women should not wear scarf in public buildings, because they want Turkey to be a secular country. For some people, mostly women, the scarf represents also the suppression of women in Turkish society. They do not believe in Erdoğan's words and think that the AKP hides some plans towards a more conservative and Islamic, male ruled Turkey.

So, actually, the scarf – besides being first of all a personal choice of women, seem to be full of different meanings. The lecture we had with Kenan Cayir<sup>1</sup> at Bilgi University pointed out that women with scarf do not represent only one homogeneous group with one identity and one political idea. There are very different reasons to wear a scarf: From women with scarf,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenan Cayir is Teaching Assistant at the Department of Sociology, Istanbul Bilgi University, and a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Bogazici University, Istanbul. He is working on Islamist movements in Turkey, mainly focusing on their literary representations.

who follow the Islam in a conservative way, are housewives and mothers, depend mostly on their husbands and have not any kind of higher education, to women who wear the scarf because of familial traditions but do not live a life strictly stuck to religious rules to head covered women with high education, criticising the male dominant discourse.

This last group of women is part of a new phenomenon in Turkey. Cayir says that since the late 1970's new Islamic movements emerged, as an eastern answer and counterpoint to western capitalism, materialism and even socialism. They argued that Islam is in decline because of western modernization. From this starting point, many different Islamic movements arose: Some of them opine for scarf covered women, are for right wing parties, others are against the right of voting, and yet others are against kemalist's reforms as a whole and against western-modernity, and there are even Kurdish Muslims who condemn nationalism and are against right wing parties. Even being very heterogeneous in their goals, all of this Islamic movements have one thing in common: they differentiate themselves from traditional Muslims and call themselves Islamists. In their point of view, Muslim refers to a passive, intrinsic category: One is born Muslim. To be an Islamist mean to them to be a conscious Muslim. They idealize the Islam, not comparing it to other religions, but comparing it to capitalism. Their idea is of revolutionary character: They want to construct an Islamic social and political system.

The novelty was that they moved to the big cities, started entering the universities and graduated from them. This was possible because of increased education facilities. With their university degrees they entered the labour market and acquired modern professions, from the late 1980's to the beginning of the 1990's: An Islamic middle class was born. One could observe it as Islamic beauty saloons opened, Islamic fashion shows could be seen on TV and luxury hotels offered special holidays for Muslim people. On the one hand, this was part of a new modernization, on the other hand this way of living made them enter a dilemma: How can, for instance, a manager of a fashion show contract women to expose themselves publicly? How can a scarf headed women work in an international company, when she is religiously not allowed to shake hands to her international colleagues? Real life started to conflict with the political life. Suddenly the new Islamists found themselves between old Islamic rules and new capitalistic rules.

Some of them started to rethink their Islamic ideals and to reformulate their concept of an Islamic system. They want it to fit to their modern world. An increasing secularism in Islamic movements began. We are still witnesses of an ongoing process of trying to rethink and

reformulate an Islamic response to western modernity. It is a process of weighing old values to new rules and habits. In this process, all poles are represented:

The radical right wing goes towards a conservative interpretation of Islam, and wants an Islamic state, where the sharia is law and order;

The radical left wing supports kemalist's reforms and is for Turkey entering the European Union;

The center-to-right wing wants an Islamic country which preserves Islamic rules and values and at the same time is open for capitalistic rules and for a process of individuation.

So – returning to the scarf subject - when we talk about what the scarf represents today, it is not possible to say that it has one meaning and one message. It represents at last so many different ways of being woman as we can see different ways of being Turkish in a country which is European and Asian at the same time, from Kemalism to Islamism, between old values and new capitalistic rules. The scarf discussion shows us that a whole country is fragmented between two or more systems and/or beliefs and women are those ones, who take position while going out on the streets with scarf or without.

My interest in this voyage was to find out, how women -with scarf and without- as well as men...

- interpret the scarf;
- think about AKP's attempt to allow the scarf again in universities;
- think about scarf-headed women in leading positions;
- What they think women could contribute to the society if they were notably represented in leading positions (whether in social, political or business life);
- would like Turkey to be in 10 years. And what should be done/should change, so that this could come true;

Therefore I did some interviews with

- two participants of our group, Esra (head covered) and Gizem (not head covered);
- an Alevi women;

- people on the streets.

Unfortunately I couldn't get head covered women besides Esra in front of the camera. There can be a lot of different reasons for it: one might be the Islamic conviction that it is better not to be pictured; another one might be a fear against western media, which often has a very lopsided and negative way of reporting about Muslims, while seeing mostly terrorists in scarf headed women or men with long bears.

So the response I will give in my film will not to as balanced as I can do it in this report. But what it can be at last is an idea of a Turkey, which is going through a crucial period of changing identities and re-inventing itself.