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Article 1.

NYT

Middle East Comments Could Vex a Romney Administration

[David E. Sanger](#)

September 18, 2012 — No one has ever had any illusions about where [Mitt Romney](#) stands on the two hottest disputes in the Middle East: the argument over the creation of a [Palestinian](#) state, and the debate over what can be done to assure that [Iran](#) does not get a nuclear weapon.

In both cases, he has taken positions very close to those of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of [Israel](#), his friend from their days together as young consultants here in Boston.

But if he is elected president in November and finds himself in negotiations over a future Palestine on Israel's borders, Mr. Romney may find that his comment at a campaign fund-raiser — captured on video — that “there's just no way” a separate state can be workable could undermine his effectiveness in bringing the two sides together. And any dealings with the mullahs of Iran may not be facilitated by his description of them, in the same video, as “crazy people.”

Mr. Romney's aides, in interviews on Tuesday at the campaign's headquarters in the North End of Boston, played down the statements. They said that there was no news in the Iran comments, and that Mr. Romney was simply arguing for a more credible strategy that would strike fear in the Iranian leadership. And they said his position on the Palestinian dispute remained unchanged: he believes in a two-state solution, the kind President George W. Bush endorsed early in his presidency.

On both the Palestinian and Iran issues, the aides said the real problem was President Obama, who they said had not been tough enough with Iran and had left the Mideast peace process to die, worsening the problem by separating the United States from Israel and leaving its ally feeling insecure and unwilling to negotiate.

Mr. Romney's foreign and legal policy director, Alex Wong, said the candidate believed that while Mr. Obama says the military option for dealing with Iran is on the table, “he spends more time worrying about an Israeli strike than he does about stopping Iranian nuclear capability.” Still, Mr. Romney's comments on the video left the strong impression that he believes any Palestinian state, jammed close to Israel's most vital and economically vibrant cities, may well be unworkable. He said he had felt “for some time” that “the Palestinians have no interest whatsoever in

establishing peace, and that the pathway to peace is almost unthinkable to accomplish.”

Mr. Romney asked his audience to imagine a map where the “border would be, maybe seven miles from Tel Aviv,” and on “the other side of what would be this new Palestinian state would either be Syria at one point or Jordan.”

“And of course the Iranians would want to do through the West Bank exactly what they did through Lebanon, what they did in Gaza,” Mr. Romney said, “which is, the Iranians would want to bring missiles and armament into the West Bank and potentially threaten Israel.”

If Israel patrolled the border, he went on, “the Palestinians would say: ‘No way! We’re an independent country. You can’t, you know, guard our border with other Arab nations.’”

“And now how about the airport? How about flying into this Palestinian nation? Are we going to allow military aircraft to come in and weaponry to come in? And if not, who’s going to keep it from coming in? Well, the Israelis. Well, the Palestinians are going to say, ‘We’re not an independent nation if Israel is able to come in and tell us what can land in our airport.’” He concluded: “I look at the Palestinians not wanting to see peace anyway, for political purposes, committed to the destruction and elimination of Israel, and these thorny issues, and I say, there’s just no way.”

Mr. Romney said the best that could be hoped for was “some degree of stability, but you recognize that this is going to remain an unsolved problem.”

The Palestinians, not surprising, had a different view. Yehia Moussa, a Hamas official in Gaza, argued that the United States had “never been suitable” as an arbiter in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute because it instinctively sided with Israel.

“We are sensing a new pattern of alliances among the Zionist lobby and the rightist Americans who believe in Zionist legends and predictions,” Mr. Moussa said. “Romney is part of this.”

Mr. Netanyahu’s spokesman, Mark Regev, said the prime minister would not comment.

On Iran, Mr. Romney made an argument — often repeated by experts in both political parties — that the biggest risk of an Iranian [nuclear program](#) is that it would supply terrorist groups with the means to make a nuclear

weapon or a “dirty bomb,” a conventional device laced with radioactive material that can make parts of a city uninhabitable. But his problem may come in how he characterized the Iranian leadership.

“America could be held up and blackmailed by Iran, by the mullahs, by crazy people,” he said. “So we really don’t have any option but to keep Iran from having a nuclear weapon.”

Mr. Romney’s aides did not say whether he believed that Iran’s leaders were rational actors who could be subjected to pressure.

Article 2.

NYT

Look in Your Mirror

[Thomas L. Friedman](#)

September 18, 2012 -- On Monday, David D. Kirkpatrick, the Cairo bureau chief for The Times, quoted one of the Egyptian demonstrators outside the American Embassy, Khaled Ali, as justifying last week’s violent protests by declaring: “We never insult any prophet — not Moses, not Jesus — so why can’t we demand that Muhammad be respected?” Mr. Ali, a 39-year-old textile worker, was holding up a handwritten sign in English that read: “Shut Up America.” “Obama is the president, so he should have to apologize!”

I read several such comments from the rioters in the press last week, and I have a big problem with them. I don’t like to see anyone’s faith insulted, but we need to make two things very clear — more clear than President Obama’s team has made them. One is that an insult — even one as stupid and ugly as the anti-Islam video on YouTube that started all of this — does not entitle people to go out and attack embassies and kill innocent diplomats. That is not how a proper self-governing people behave. There is no excuse for it. It is shameful. And, second, before demanding an apology from our president, Mr. Ali and the young Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Yemenis, Pakistanis, Afghans and Sudanese who have been taking to the streets might want to look in the mirror — or just turn on their own televisions. They might want to look at the chauvinistic bile that is pumped out by some of their own media — on satellite television stations and Web

sites or sold in sidewalk bookstores outside of mosques — insulting Shiites, Jews, Christians, Sufis and anyone else who is not a Sunni, or fundamentalist, Muslim. There are people in their countries for whom hating “the other” has become a source of identity and a collective excuse for failing to realize their own potential.

[The Middle East Media Research Institute](#), or Memri, was founded in 1998 in Washington by Yigal Carmon, a former Israeli government adviser on counterterrorism, “to bridge the language gap between the Middle East and the West by monitoring, translating and studying Arab, Iranian, Urdu and Pashtu media, schoolbooks, and religious sermons.” What I respect about Memri is that it translates not only the ugly stuff but the courageous liberal, reformist Arab commentators as well. I asked Memri for a sampler of the hate-filled videos that appear regularly on Arab/Muslim mass media. Here are some:

ON CHRISTIANS Hasan Rahimpur Azghadi of the Iranian Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution: Christianity is “a reeking corpse, on which you have to constantly pour eau de cologne and perfume, and wash it in order to keep it clean.” <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/1528.htm> — July 20, 2007.

Sheik Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi: It is permissible to spill the blood of the Iraqi Christians — and a duty to wage jihad against them.

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/5200.htm> — April 14, 2011.

Abd al-Aziz Fawzan al-Fawzan, a Saudi professor of Islamic law, calls for “positive hatred” of Christians. Al-Majd TV (Saudi Arabia),

<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/992.htm> — Dec. 16, 2005.

ON SHIITES The Egyptian Cleric Muhammad Hussein Yaaqub: “Muslim Brotherhood Presidential Candidate Mohamed Morsi told me that the Shiites are more dangerous to Islam than the Jews.”

www.memritv.org/clip/en/3466.htm — June 13, 2012.

The Egyptian Cleric Mazen al-Sirsawi: “If Allah had not created the Shiites as human beings, they would have been donkeys.”

<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3101.htm> — Aug. 7, 2011.

The Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan video series: “The Shiite is a Nasl [Race/Offspring] of Jews.”

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/51/6208.htm> — March 21, 2012.

ON JEWS Article on the Muslim Brotherhood's Web site praises jihad against America and the Jews: "The Descendants of Apes and Pigs."

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/51/6656.htm> — Sept. 7, 2012.

The Pakistani cleric Muhammad Raza Saqib Mustafai: "When the Jews are wiped out, the world would be purified and the sun of peace would rise on the entire world." <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/51/6557.htm>

— Aug. 1, 2012.

Dr. Ismail Ali Muhammad, a senior Al-Azhar scholar: The Jews, "a source of evil and harm in all human societies."

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/51/6086.htm> — Feb. 14, 2012.

ON SUFIS A shrine venerating a Sufi Muslim saint in Libya has been partly destroyed, the latest in a series of attacks blamed on ultraconservative Salafi Islamists. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19380083> — Aug. 26, 2012.

As a Jew who has lived and worked in the Muslim world, I know that these expressions of intolerance are only one side of the story and that there are deeply tolerant views and strains of Islam espoused and practiced there as well. Theirs are complex societies.

That's the point. America is a complex society, too. But let's cut the nonsense that this is just our problem and the only issue is how we clean up our act. That Cairo protester is right: We should respect the faiths and prophets of others. But that runs both ways. Our president and major newspapers consistently condemn hate speech against other religions. How about yours?

Article 3.

Project Syndicate

Big Countries, Small Wars

Robert Skidelsky

18 September 2012 – US President Barack Obama has vowed to avenge the murder of J. Christopher Stevens, America's former ambassador to Libya. How he proposes to do this is unclear – historical precedent is of little use.

In 1864, the Emperor of Abyssinia took hostage the British consul, together with some missionaries, in the country's then-capital, Magdala. Three years later, with Emperor Tewodros still refusing to release them, the British

dispatched an expeditionary force of 13,000 troops, 26,000 camp followers, and 44 elephants.

In his book *The Blue Nile*, Alan Moorehead described the expedition thus: “It proceeds first to last with the decorum and heavy inevitability of a Victorian state banquet, complete with ponderous speeches.” Yet it was a fearsome undertaking. After a three-month journey through the mountains, the British reached Magdala, released the hostages, and burned the capital to the ground. Emperor Tewodros committed suicide, the British withdrew, and their commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Napier, was made Baron Napier of Magdala.

Today's great powers have relied on similar methods, also heavy with rhetoric, against puny opponents, but with far less convincing results. The United States put 500,000 troops into Vietnam in the 1960's, but withdrew before North Vietnam overran the South in 1975. The Russians began pulling their 100,000 troops from Afghanistan in 1987, after nine years of fighting had failed to subdue the country.

Now, 25 years and \$500 billion later, roughly 100,000 NATO troops, mainly American, are about to leave Afghanistan, with the Taliban still controlling much of it. Meanwhile, the US has withdrawn 150,000 troops from Iraq, after nine years of frustration.

The evidence is clear: big countries can lose small wars. So, if massive use of force fails, how is a big country, believing that its interests or moral duty compel it to intervene in the affairs of a small one, to do so successfully? Gillo Pontecorvo's brilliant 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* spelled out the dilemma for the occupying colonial power. The FLN (National Liberation Front) uprising against French rule in Algeria started in 1954 with assassinations of policemen. The French at first responded with orthodox measures – more police, curfews, martial law, etc. – but the insurgency spread amid growing atrocities by both sides.

In 1957, the French sent in paratroopers. Their commander in the film, Colonel Mathieu (based on General Jacques Massu), explained the logic of the situation from the French point of view. The way to crack the insurgency was not to antagonize the people with oppressive, but “useless” measures; it was to take out the FLN's command structure. Eliminate that and the result would be a leaderless mass.

This required the use of torture to identify and locate the leaders, followed by their capture or assassination. Torture was illegal, but, as the Colonel explained, “If you want France to stay, you must accept the consequences.” Colonel Mathieu is the unsung hero of current counter-insurgency orthodoxy, which requires a minimum military presence in the target country, mainly of intelligence agencies like the CIA and “special forces.” Through “rendition,” a captured suspect can be handed over to a friendly government to be tortured, and, on the basis of the information thus gathered, “kill lists” can be compiled.

The killing of Osama bin Laden last year required an actual hit squad to verify its success, but normally assassinations can be left to drones – unmanned aircraft, mainly used for surveillance, but which can be armed with computer-guided missiles. Not surprisingly, the US is the leading developer and user of drones, with a fleet of 7,500. An estimated 3,000 drone killings have taken place, mostly in Pakistan, but also in Yemen and Somalia.

The other half of the counter-insurgency strategy is to win the “hearts and minds” of populations that are susceptible to terrorist propaganda. The Americans did this in Vietnam by pouring in consumer goods and building up infrastructure. They are doing the same in Iraq and Afghanistan. The civilian side of “nation building,” it is reckoned, will be made easier by the absence of a heavy-handed foreign military presence.

Trying to win hearts and minds is certainly an improvement over bombing or shooting up the local population. But the new way of conducting “asymmetrical warfare” does raise uncomfortable ethical and legal issues.

[The United Nations Convention on Torture](#) explicitly forbids “cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment,” so their use must be denied. Also, assassination by drones inevitably leads to the killing of innocent civilians – the very crime that defines terrorism.

Even putting aside moral and legal questions – which one should never do – it is doubtful whether the strategy of torture and assassination can achieve its pacifying purpose. It repeats the mistake made in 1957 by Massu, who assumed that he faced a cohesive organization with a single command structure. Relative calm was restored to Algiers for a couple of years after his arrival, but then the insurgency broke out again with redoubled strength, and the French had to leave the country in 1962.

Today, the international community similarly misconceives the nature of the “war” that it is fighting. There is no single worldwide terrorist organization with a single head. Insofar as Al Qaeda still exists at all, it is a Hydra that sprouts new heads as fast as the old ones are cut off. Trying to win “hearts and minds” with Western goods simply corrupts, and thus discredits, the governments established by those intervening. It happened in Vietnam, and it is happening now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We are being driven slowly but ineluctably to the realization that the people whom we are fighting will, to a significant extent, inherit the shattered countries that we leave behind. They are fighting, after all, for their peoples’ right to (mis)manage their affairs in their own way. Blame the French Revolution for having bequeathed to us the idea that self-government is always better than good government.

Robert Skidelsky, Professor Emeritus of Political Economy at Warwick University and a fellow of the British Academy in both history and economics, is a working member of the British House of Lords. The author of a seminal three-volume biography of John Maynard Keynes.

Article 4.

Al-Hayat

Energy Security a Priority for Israel

Walid Khadduri

18 September 2012 -- Israel is currently reviewing the policy on gas it intends to adopt in the future, shortly before natural gas production begins in the Tamar field in the spring of 2013. The ministerial committee set up by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and tasked by the government to draft policies on natural gas consumption at home as well as gas exports, finished drafting its final report on August 29, kicking off discussions over its contents.

The committee is known by its chairman’s name, Shaul Zemach, Director General of the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources. It is one of several such bodies created to shape the country’s policy regarding its natural gas

resources. Here, another committee is also doing significant work: The Sheshinski Committee, which has since proposed a controversial hydrocarbon tax.

The Zemach Committee report indicates that the priority for Israel is energy security. This means meeting domestic demand for decades to come, and limiting gas quantities meant for export to certain levels that cannot be exceeded, except with the consent of the Ministry of Energy. In light of this report, which is being currently reviewed, Israel is set to export around 500 billion cubic meters of liquefied natural gas, or 53 % of the total gas reserves which have been discovered – i.e. 950 billion cubic meters-, according to the committee. In other words, around 450 billion cubic meters of gas will be retained for domestic consumption, for the next quarter of a century.

Gas discoveries in Israel began more than a decade ago. A consortium comprising the American firm Noble Energy and several Israeli energy companies, discovered the fields Noa and Mari-B in Israel's southern waters in 1999 and 2000; but the production of these two fields was very limited and not commercially lucrative.

Nevertheless, these two fields provided Israel with gas for power generation, replacing imported coal and petroleum derivatives – and Egyptian gas imported through El Arish. The Egyptian pipeline was the target of several explosions, both during and after the uprising. Egypt then suspended the 20-year old gas agreement with the Hebrew state.

In 2009, Noble Energy discovered the Tamar gas field in Israel's northern water, off the coast of Haifa. In December, 2010, Noble also discovered the Leviathan field.

Tamar is estimated to hold about 8.4 trillion cubic feet of gas; production from it is set to begin in March or April, 2013. Noble also signed seven important long-term agreements with Israeli companies to use the gas from the Tamar field locally, at a price of \$ 5-5.5 per million BTUs. But these agreements will need the approval of the Israeli authorities, because the gas industry in the country is monopolized by Noble Energy.

As concerns Leviathan, this is the largest field in Israel. It is located in the waters adjacent to the Tamar field, and holds around 17 trillion cubic feet of gas, or about 418 billion cubic meters; production from this field is set to begin in 2016.

Negotiations are underway to offer the stocks of the companies operating in the field for sale. Remarkably, the successive and significant gas discoveries made in northern Israeli waters faced their first major failure earlier this month. This happened when the consortium of Israel Land Development Corporation and Modiin Energy failed to find gas in the exploratory well Mira-1, located near Tamar and Leviathan.

Zemach's report confirmed the importance of linking all Israeli gas fields, whether those located in territorial waters or the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), to the local gas distribution network that will be built. The report also confirmed that the government will be responsible for delivering the gas to local consumers, which means that the Israeli companies working in Tamar and Leviathan will have to deliver specific proportions of their quotas in these two fields to the government for internal consumption, and export the remainder volumes.

The Israeli gas industry has managed to make quick strides, beating many other East Mediterranean countries in this field. But at the same time, the Israeli gas industry faces significant hurdles, both commercial and economic, that cannot be overlooked. Indeed, exploration and drilling in the East Mediterranean involve very large depths, sometimes reaching about 20,000 feet below sea level. This means that the cost of exploration, drilling, development and production is extremely high.

To be sure, estimates indicate that Israel needs to drill about 20 additional exploratory wells over the next two years, at a cost of \$ 100 million per well. The estimated costs for this expansion currently stand at about \$ 2 billion.

These costs may perhaps help explain the interest shown by companies operating in the Leviathan field, in selling some of their states to international companies – in order to reduce their financial burdens-, not to mention the interest shown by major companies in this huge field. The Israeli gas industry also faces challenges as a result of the current large decline in global gas prices, because of growing shale gas production, particularly in the United States. This has allowed the latter to begin exporting gas, instead of relying on imports, pushing prices down to about \$ 3 per million BTU. This large decline, naturally, has negatively impacted the Israeli economy, particularly as concerns its gas export plans.

Furthermore, the gas industry in Israel faces pressure towards reaching a diplomatic solution with Lebanon over their respective EEZs, which are very promising in terms of possible gas discoveries, not to mention diplomatic attempts to put an end to Israeli resistance to production from the Gaza Marine field in Palestinian territorial waters – which was discovered early last decade. Israel insists on receiving gas volumes from the Palestinian side that Israel itself determines, with high discounts, and provided that gas is delivered first to Israeli territories before reaching Gaza.

Mr. Khadduri is a consultant for MEES Oil & Gas (MeesEnergy)

Article 5.

Guardian

Binyamin Netanyahu's Iran strategy erases the Palestinian problem

[Chris McGreal](#)

18 September -- [Binyamin Netanyahu](#)'s appearance on [Meet the Press](#) this weekend was telling.

Interviewer David Gregory called him the "leader of the Jewish people". That's certainly how the Israeli prime minister would like to see himself, and he wouldn't be the first.

Israeli leaders have long claimed the mantle of voice of the Jewish people around the world and protector of the Diaspora. Part of that is rooted in the idea of [Israel](#) as a safe haven, and the desire of every Israeli government to draw in new citizens. A few years back, Ariel Sharon tried to tell Jews in France that they were so [persecuted](#) they needed to move to Israel for their own protection. This at a time when Hamas and Islamic Jihad were blowing innocents to pieces in Jerusalem restaurants and on Tel Aviv buses. There was no rush to the El Al flight from Paris.

But there is also the global aspect. Netanyahu stood [before the United Nations](#) last year and claimed to speak for hundreds of generations of Jews across the world. It was an attempt to elevate himself above a mere political leader to claim to represent the full weight of Jewish suffering in justifying his government's stance towards the Palestinians.

Gregory's slip – he later [corrected himself](#) by tweeting that it would be better to call Netanyahu the leader of Jewish state – was revealing of a mindset in certain sections of the American press that has a hard time dealing with the fact that Israel's prime minister might not be the leader of an entire people, but just another politician less worried about the common good than shoring up his power.

That was where Meet the Press was revealing on a second point. It threw up evidence of just how successful Netanyahu has been at putting his political interests before those of Israel's future, which should lie in keeping the ever-dimming prospect of a two-state solution alive.

There wasn't a single mention of the Palestinians [during the 15 minute interview](#). Gregory didn't ask about them, and Netanyahu didn't talk about them. Thus the fate of several million people living under varying degrees of an occupation that continues to plunder land, maintain discriminatory laws and administrative procedures – such as [rationing water](#) to Arab villages while their neighbors in the Jewish settlements have unlimited supplies – remains in limbo. Netanyahu's government, meanwhile, pays lip service to the creation of a Palestinian state while pursuing policies intended to stave off the day of its birth.

Just last week, the prime minister moved to expand 40 West Bank settlements built on land [confiscated illegally](#) – Israel admits it was illegal – from Palestinians by military order. Hardly the actions of a man or a government that only wants peace, as is so often claimed.

As prime minister, Netanyahu's great achievement, as he would see it, is to have made the Palestinians all but invisible – first at home, and then abroad.

Locked behind the land-grabbing West Bank barrier and caged in the Gaza strip, Palestinians have all but ceased to touch the lives of most Israelis.

The occupation no longer demands an exacting price, so far as many Israelis are concerned. Yes, there is the inconvenience of military service; and there are unseen costs, such as financing the settlement project. But on

the whole, Netanyahu has enabled Israelis to pretty much forget about the Palestinians if they choose to. And many do.

Now, the Israeli leader has made the Palestinians disappear from the international stage, too, with the "will he, won't he" drama of threatening to bomb [Iran](#).

Three years ago, Netanyahu was humiliated by Barack Obama with a public scolding to [stop settlement expansion](#). Even a year ago, the Palestinian [bid for statehood](#) at the UN at least put the issue on the agenda, even if Washington sided with Israel by strong-arming members of the security council into blocking it. In [two weeks](#), the Palestinians return to the UN to try again on recognition, this time with the general assembly. But, as Meet the Press showed, there's not much talk of that while Netanyahu draws Washington's energies into trying to prevent him from [attacking Iran](#) before the US election. Whether he ever meant to is open to debate.

But the effect has been clear. When the Israeli prime minister was last in Washington, there was barely a mention of the Palestinians after his meeting with Obama. And barely a word was breathed about the Palestinians at this year's meeting of the most influential of the pro-Israel lobby groups in Washington, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac). The focus was firmly on Iran.

Netanyahu has everyone where he wants them. The Palestinians behind the wire and most of the rest of the world looking the other way.

Article 6.

The New York Review of Books

Turkey's Towering Ambition

Hugh Eakin

In March 1548, having brought the Ottoman Empire to the height of its power, Suleiman the Magnificent decided to build a mosque in Istanbul.

“At that time,” an anonymous chronicler explains, His Highness the world-ruling sultan realized the impermanence of the base world and the necessity to leave behind a monument so as to be commemorated till the end of time....Following the devout path of former sultans, he ordered the construction of a matchless mosque complex for his own noble self.

In late May of this year, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—Turkey’s powerful prime minister, a devout Muslim, and the self-styled leader of the new Middle East—announced that he would be erecting his own grand mosque above the Bosphorus. It will be more prominent than Suleiman’s. The chosen site—the Büyük Çamlıca Tepesi, or Big Çamlıca Hill, overlooking the city’s Asian shore—is 268 meters above sea level; it is easily the most conspicuous point of land in greater metropolitan Istanbul. (A favorite look-out spot, it is here that the protagonist in Namik Kemal’s late Ottoman novel *Awakening* (1876) begins a tragic love affair with a woman of loose morals.)

“We will build an even larger dome than our ancestors made,” an architect involved in the project, Hacı Mehmet Güner, [boasted](#) to the Turkish daily *Milliyet* in early July. Güner added that the mosque would be built in a “classical style” and have six minarets—more than any in Istanbul save for the Blue Mosque (Suleiman’s mosque, the Süleymaniye, has four). He also said that their height would exceed that of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, whose tallest minarets are 344 feet.

Among Turkey’s secular elite, these plans have met with a mixture of incredulity and derision. Suleiman’s mosque complex was built by Sinan, the greatest Ottoman architect; Güner was a little known municipal public works official. One architecture professor likened the envisioned vast prayer hall to an “Olympic stadium.” Nor has Erdoğan’s previous record of mosque building helped his case. In July, with debate over the Çamlıca project in full swing, the prime minister announced the completion of another Ottoman-style mosque on Istanbul’s Asian shore by calling it a *selatin* mosque—using the word for religious institutions built at the behest of a sultan. “Has Erdoğan Just Declared His Sultanate?,” one Turkish newspaper editor [asked](#).

Nonetheless, walking the streets of Istanbul this summer, I found it difficult to miss the intended symbolism. Erdoğan, who comes from the city’s rough

Kasımpaşa neighborhood and has not conquered any foreign countries, is hardly a Suleiman. But after a decade in power in which he has presided over a record economic boom and a dramatic resurgence of Turkey in international affairs, he is widely acknowledged as the most powerful politician since Kemal Atatürk, the country's modern founder. At the same time, he has gone further than any of his predecessors in moving away from the stridently anti-religious state that Atatürk created in the 1920s. Soon after proclaiming the new republic in 1923, Atatürk's government abolished the caliphate and closed the madrasas, turning Turkey overnight into the most secular nation in the Muslim world. But earlier this year, Erdoğan declared he wanted the country to have a "religious youth," and, since March, when parliament passed a controversial bill to expand Islamic education, more than sixty new religious schools have [opened](#) in Istanbul. When you enter the courtyard of one of the city's historic mosques, you are increasingly likely to run into groups of young boys or girls (they are separated by gender) sitting at little desks, receiving instruction in the Quran.

Headscarves, once rare in the fashionable European districts that Orhan Pamuk writes about in *The Museum of Innocence*, have become common, including in high-end, designer versions. All over the city, Ottoman religious complexes are being restored at great expense (among them a beautiful Sinan [madrasa](#), built around an octagonal courtyard, which construction workers proudly showed off to me). One Turkish political analyst complained that the call to prayer, broadcast everywhere on outdoor speakers, is far louder than it used to be. And the Ramadan fast, once better known locally for being honored in the breach, was embraced this summer with newfound rigor. Under pressure from the religious establishment, a local rock music festival that was staged a few days before the beginning of the Muslim holiday decided to [ban alcohol](#), despite having been sponsored by Turkey's largest beer company.

This is not the first time that Turkey's deeply secular state has seemed to move in a more religious direction. As far back as 1967, a close replica of another sixteenth-century Sinan mosque was built in Ankara; a more daring, modernist design by [Vedat Dalokay](#) was rejected. Turgut Özal, who was prime minister in the late 1980s and is credited with beginning the economic opening to the world that has matured under Erdoğan, was a

devout Muslim who went on the Hajj while in office. And Erdoğan's own AKP party is a direct heir to the since-banned Islamist party of Necmettin Erbakan, who briefly served as Turkey's first Islamist prime minister in the 1990s (leading to a military coup in 1997).

But what makes the recent changes particularly dramatic is that the Turks themselves seem to be generally embracing them: headgear has become a point of pride for many Anatolian businesswomen, and the recent alcohol bans appear to have been imposed as much by local communities—by some far more than others—as by higher authorities. Indeed, Erdoğan, now in his third term of office, has a huge base of popular support. And while the AKP has [not quite gained](#) the supermajority in parliament the prime minister has sought, it has had sufficient dominance to transform significant parts of the Turkish political system.

In successive steps that have continued in recent days, the prime minister has skillfully taken control of the once-dominant—and fiercely secular—Turkish military; dozens of top generals and admirals have been thrown in jail for alleged coup plots, including one that supposedly involved [bombing mosques](#) in Istanbul. Meanwhile, his conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or AKP) has been pushing through far-reaching reforms of the judiciary and the education system, some suggest, to favor its own agenda. (Erdoğan's rapid transformation of the courts from a bastion of Turkey's military-secular elite into a key part of his own campaign against the military can only be the envy of Egypt's new Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, whose judiciary remains loyal to its own politically powerful armed forces.) More radically, AKP leaders are now drafting a new constitution that, if adopted, could turn Turkey's parliamentary system into a strong presidential republic—just in time for Erdoğan's planned move in 2014 to the presidency, where he could spend another decade running the country.

Certainly, the most controversial aspects of Erdoğan's leadership have little to do with religion. Human rights activists are far more concerned by what they describe as his increasingly authoritarian style of leadership and his use of the police and judiciary to suppress critics. In July, the government announced it was eliminating the much-criticized special court system that has been used to prosecute “conspiracy” cases and “terrorism-related” crimes. But dozens of [journalists](#), students, and [scholars](#) are already in jail,

many of them for writing about the Kurdish PKK, or criticizing the government's ties to the powerful Gulen religious movement. Abolishing these courts has struck critics as largely cosmetic; other courts may end up with the same sweeping powers. In a recent [interview](#) with Christiane Amanpour, Erdoğan disputed the number of jailed journalists, claiming that “there are 80 people who are in prison right now. Only nine of them have yellow press identification cards.” But he also said, “insult is one thing; criticism is another thing. I will never put up with an insult.”

At the same time, the Turkish government has gone from a dull but reliable NATO ally to an assertive leader of the new Middle East. Before last year's uprisings, Turkey made much of its “zero problems” strategy with all neighboring powers—a policy that included promoting economic ties with Assad's Syria and Ahmadinejad's Iran, and, before the flotilla raid, working relations with Israel. Now, Ankara has renewed ties with [Hamas](#) while aggressively supporting the Sunni-led Syrian uprising and giving refuge to fugitive Iraqi vice president Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni leader who was sentenced to death in Iraq last week on charges of orchestrating sectarian killings. With Sunni-led governments in charge through much of the Middle East and Turkish economic growth driven increasingly by [trade relations with the Gulf](#), Erdoğan seems to have found it convenient to bring Turkey closer to the old lands of the Caliphate, regardless of the diplomatic consequences.

All this, too, can be seen on the streets of Istanbul. Amid the attractions of the Old City, the usual summer influx of European tourists was leavened this year by groups of visitors from the Arabian peninsula, often with the women in full black niqab. In fact, there has been a staggering [71 percent increase](#) in Arab visitors to Turkey in the first six months of 2012, a figure that is even higher for some nations like the UAE and Qatar. I asked several Turkish friends about it and was told that Arabs have supplanted Israelis, who before the [flotilla incident](#) used to visit Turkey in large numbers. Part of the appeal—along with Halal food, Turkish soap operas, and ample new shopping centers—seems to be that the country is now led by a popular Muslim leader with strong pro-Arab credentials. A new Turkish law has also made it easier for foreign nationals to invest in real estate, a move that seems to be particularly aimed at [Arab investors](#).

One longtime Istanbul resident, citing the government's interest in malls and infrastructure projects that can "rival Mecca," suggested that the new pro-Arab policies have been accompanied by Persian Gulf-style urban development. Large as it is, she observed, the planned Çamlica mosque complex—which is apparently to be funded by pro-AKP businessmen—is far from Erdoğan's most ambitious building project. In recent months, he has renewed his campaign promise to dig a second Bosphorus, a thirty-mile shipping channel to the Black Sea—an undertaking so enormous that, he claims, it would surpass the Suez and Panama canals. And the government's announcement this spring that it plans to fill in a 2.8 square mile section of the Sea of Marmara along the Istanbul shore—apparently to create a public assembly space for up to 800,000 people—has been [compared](#) by one writer to "wanting to straighten the Seine or turn the Colosseum into a football stadium."

But far more than the scale or apparent religious content of such mega-projects, what has rankled Turkish critics most is how they will look. In late July, perhaps embarrassed by the Çamlica controversy, the Islamic association overseeing the mosque project took out advertisements in Turkish newspapers announcing an architectural design competition for the complex. But the hasty competition seemed to [foreclose](#) the possibility that something exciting or unusual might arise from it: entries were limited to Turkish architects and not much more than a month was allotted for designs to be submitted—all of which had to conform to the enormous proportions of the building specified. (The winning design was supposed to be announced earlier this month, but the decision has been postponed.) The larger irony is that in calling for a huge new mosque in the tradition of Sinan, Erdoğan may be missing the more fundamental lesson of the Ottoman architect's work. As Bruno Taut, the German architect who emigrated to Turkey to flee the Nazis, argued, Sinan was himself a proto-modernist whose ability to create extraordinary beauty from novel engineering had more in common with twentieth-century German functionalism than earlier Islamic architecture. Rather than imitating his predecessors' designs, he continuously sought out new and more subtle ways to surpass them. Sinan aimed to be more elegant than his Byzantine and Ottoman forebears; Erdoğan, it seems, just wants to be taller.

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