



Alcohol consumption in modern Turkey:

Kulturkampf and polarization

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- A culture war (*Kulturmampf*) is raging in Turkey, and alcohol is one of the major fronts once again.
- Opposing cultural identities are emerging as a powerful instrument of polarization.
- The ongoing culture war is revealing the AKP's potential, but also its limits.

On the one hand, there are those whose lifestyles are shaped on the basis of an image of the good society with science and human rationality at its core, which we may loosely refer to as a ‘Secular Image of Good Society’. On the other hand, are those whose lifestyles are based on the core values of tradition and religion (mainly Sunni Islam), which may best be referred to as a ‘Conservative Image of Good Society’.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently complained about alcohol drinkers, saying that although some people "are miserably hungry, they continue buying beer and raki". And he has announced yet more tax increases on alcohol and tobacco.

At the end of April, during the Ramadan fast, the Turkish public was shaken by photos of a group of young women and men drinking raki, the most popular Turkish alcoholic beverage, during the Laylat al-Qadr (Kadir Gecesi)¹. While sharing the photos of their table with its glasses on social media, one of the group added “Exclusive to Kadir Gecesi, May God accept”(Kadir Gecesi özel, Rabbim kabul etsin), a comment that infuriated conservatives even more.

The drinking party and the social media post immediately became an issue, and the company for which the person who posted the photo and comment worked, the air carrier Pegasus, announced that the person had been fired.

Alcohol consumption and the Turkish *Kulturkampf*

Ersin Kalaycioglu² argues that in Turkey, the “culture war” or *Kulturkampf* is between two large communities divided along cultural lines:

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For almost two decades now, alcohol has been an integral part of the ongoing *Kulturkampf* in Turkey between secularists and conservative Islamists.

Alcohol consumption has been a highly sensitive matter since the end of the Ottoman Empire and through the decades of secularist governments until the emergence of the AKP.

As Sylvie Gangloff argues (Sylvie Gangloff, 2015, Boire en Turquie. Pratiques et représentations de l'alcool, Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme), alcohol has been held aloft as a politico-religious symbol: a symbol of opposition between the Islamic East and the modern West; a symbol of modernity for some and of acculturation or tradition for others.

This sensitivity stems from the fact that alcohol consumption was tightly intertwined with the process of modernization or “occidentalization” of the Ottoman Empire first, and the Republic of Turkey later.

Grigoriadis & Grigoriadis³ argue that:

¹ This is the night when, according to Islamic tradition, the Quran was first sent down from heaven to the world and also the night when the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13608746.2011.600555>

³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10602-018-9262-5>

Kulturkampf has been observed in different phases of the Republican modernization program. In the late 1920s and early 1930s it was framed around Ataturk's Westernization radical secularization program. Since the advent of multi-party politics and the rise of Turkish political Islam, Kulturkampf has been revamped as a fight for Turkish public sphere between secularists and Sunni conservatives.

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Despite the fact that alcohol consumption was present in the Ottoman Empire for centuries, the first-time alcohol became part of the long and still ongoing culture wars was during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808–39), who had a major impact on the Empire as its first reformist ruler.

As Francois Georgeon described in his history of alcohol consumption in Istanbul during the 19th century, Sultan Mahmud II, who modeled himself on European rulers, introduced the serving of alcohol, mainly champagne, on public occasions like dinners and receptions. The alcohol culture would spread through the modernizing intellectuals and high officials of the Empire, though there was always a “touch” of local Ottoman “authenticity”: local raki was preferred to wine. (Francois Georgeon, 2002, ‘Ottoman Drinkers: The Consumption of Alcohol in Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century, in Rogan, Eugene, ed., Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East, London: I B Tauris)

Alcohol would become an issue during the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), who mobilized Sunni Islam as an ideological buffer against the Empire’s slow disintegration.

Before the foundation of the Republic, alcohol consumption would be banned by a law which was passed by a single vote on 14 September 1920. The new legislation required all alcoholic drinks in the country to be exported to non-Muslims or destroyed within 2 months and imposed heavy fines or a jail sentence on those who continued to use, produce and sell alcoholic drinks. It even threatened to strip civil servants of their positions, if they disobeyed.

However, the ban would be removed in 1924, one year after the declaration of the Republic of Turkey, and alcohol consumption would continue to be one of the most eloquent and public demonstrations of “modernity” and “occidentalization” among the ruling elites and the bourgeoisie.

As Evered and Evered argue⁴, the *Kulturkampf* surrounding alcohol in Turkey was already ongoing during the first days of the Republican era.

[...] the Turkish clearly encouraged its population to undergo a “culturally grounded habituation” to social drinking (...) In this context, citizens adhering to the Kemalist vision of a modern Turkey may have learned to drink as an act of not only recreation but also as an expression of nationalism, secularism and/or their abandonment of traditional moral and societal conformity.

⁴ Emine Ö. Evered & Kyle T. Evered, 2016, From raki to ayran: regulating the place and practice of drinking in Turkey, Space and Polity, 20:1, pp.39–58.

Alcohol and resistance

Thus, within the ongoing *Kulturkampf*, drinking in modern Turkey became, and remains, a statement of cultural identity.

The act of drinking and the staging of this drinking are experienced as a sign, a symbol, of one's social belonging, of one's identity and, by assimilating one's personal environment to a wider environment, namely that of the country, as a symbol of the country's identity.

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Intrinsic to this identity dimension, alcohol consumption is also a political act, indeed a political statement since, as Gangloff explains, the use of alcohol also became an object of political mobilization, of militancy, making it possible to affirm that Turkey, since alcohol is drunk there, is a secular and modern country.

The political mobilization around alcohol became even more tense after 1996, when the Islamists gained power in the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara, but mainly after 2002, when the AKP came to power. As [Nazlan Ertan explains](#): “In 2002, the AKP adopted the Special Consumption Tax (ÖTV), which raised the tax on alcoholic beverages from 18% (the standard VAT rate) to an astounding 48%--and kept increasing it over the years. In 2009, it imposed limitations on alcohol advertisements that made it practically impossible to advertise wine, beer or raki, and four years later, it banned alcoholic drink advertisements altogether”.

“The law enacted in 2013 also prevents sports teams from using the names of alcoholic drinks in their names, so the Turkish basketball team Efes Pilsen (after Turkey's most popular beer) changed its name to Anadolu Efes”.

The tax on alcohol continues to rise: today, [according to official data](#), the tax on raki is 287% and very high on wine and beer, too.

Since the Gezi protests in 2013, alcohol consumption has been transformed from political mobilization to something close to an act of resistance to the power of the AKP. During the Gezi protests, one of the most common toasts protesters made while drinking was “to Erdoğan’s health”, and even the foreign press wrote about “[resisting by raising a glass](#)”.

Within this rather distorting frame, Gangloff claims that “The sign of secularism, democracy and modernity is the alcoholic drink!”, going on to say of young people in Istanbul: “Drinking a glass of alcohol in the street after dark while singing with friends has thus become a sign of defiance of power” (Gangloff, op. cit.). The frame is distorting because, for decades, the hardline secularists in Turkey stigmatized those who didn’t drink alcohol as “backward” and against modernity.

However, [as Angeletopoulos and Areteos argue](#), the conservative element in Turkish society are engaged in the ongoing re-appropriation and hybridization of modernity, as a result of which the external signs and symbols of tradition, like the headscarf, and modernity, like consuming alcohol, have actually lost their initial significance and meanings. It is therefore distorting to assimilate alcohol consumption with modernity and its values in today’s Turkey.

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In the current political context, with Turkey having entered a long run-up to elections whose result remains uncertain, alcohol is also being employed by both the government and the Opposition as an instrument of polarization and hence of political consolidation. Once again, 'morality' and different lifestyles are the front-line trenches in the culture war.

Morality and cultural polarization around alcohol

In the eyes of Turkey's current ruling elites, alcohol consumption is also heavily interwoven with the notion of morality in the Islamic tradition, thus digging yet another trench between those who drink, and are seen as immoral, and those who don't.

According to a [Pew Research Center report](#) from 2013, 66% of Turks believed that drinking alcohol was morally wrong, while only 11% considered it morally acceptable.

The polarization around alcohol has become an integral part of the official narrative about youth morality, and thus the morality of Turkey as a whole.

One of the most powerful images to emerge from this *Kulturkampf* is the contrast made by conservatives between, on the one hand, the "two drunkards" (*iki ayyas*), meaning the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and his close collaborator and successor Ismet İnönü and, on the other, the 'pious' Sultan Abdülhamid II.

Tayyip Erdoğan has declared that "we do not want a drunken generation" (*Kafası kiyak nesil istemiyoruz*), while he has repeatedly said that "we will raise a pious generation" (*Dindar nesil yetiştireceğiz*).

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Despite the high taxation, the delimiting of special "alcohol zones" (*kırmızı sokaklar* or *kırmızı bölgeler*) resulting in "regulation by segregation" and moves which have made it far harder to acquire special permits required to sell alcohol, the AKP has remained a regulatory, not a prohibitionist, agent (Evered & Evered, op. cit.).

Nevertheless, as in other lifestyle domains such as music and concerts, where the AKP is seen as intervening in individuals' lifestyles by [instigating a wave of concert and festival cancellations](#), the various restrictions on alcohol consumption, like high taxation and segregation, coupled with the moral stigmatization of alcohol consumers, are perceived as authoritarian interference in personal behaviors and liberties.

But this interference in private lifestyles does not only spring from a moralist conception of society and the younger generations. Nationalism is also marshalled within this *Kulturkampf*, with alcohol used to polarize between the Other, meaning the "non-authentic" Turk who drinks alcohol, and the "authentic" or "real" Turk who does not. As Evered and Evered write:

Erdogan decried what he viewed as a false tradition of viewing raki (or even beer) as the nation's drink (despite national declarations to the contrary); rather, he avowed that ayran (an alcohol-free, yogurt-based beverage – one that is truly ubiquitous in many homes and public eateries) is Turkey's true "national drink".

Despite all the government's efforts, the statistics reveal a significant increase in alcohol consumption in Turkey.

This increase implies that alcohol consumption in Turkey is deeply rooted among a small but significant part of the population which is not yet ready to give it up. Polarization around alcohol shows that the government's efforts to change the character of society and impose a conservative, religious-oriented morality is meeting with little success.

Alcohol consumption under the AKP and the limits of the *Kulturkampf*

Since the AKP came to power, both alcohol consumption and production [have become key issues in public life and matters of great concern](#). The main goal of Erdoğan's government has been to reduce the Turkish people's use of alcohol. In order to achieve this aim, the government has implemented a series of measures, including rapid increases in the price of alcoholic beverages, high taxes, and bans. Specifically, in 2013 the [Turkish National Assembly](#) approved a series of bans on the consumption of alcoholic beverages with severe penalties and fines who ignored them, as well as forbidding the sale of alcoholic drinks after 10 pm and any advertising of alcohol products.

All this, combined with the devaluation of the Turkish lira against foreign currencies, had a [drastic impact on domestic alcohol production](#). Illicit alcohol production and smuggling also began to increase. According to World Health Organization statistics, illegal alcohol production in Turkey increased rapidly between 2005 and 2020. In particular, starting in 2014, the number of internet searches for home winemaking and the purchase of ethyl alcohol have both increased sharply. Raki, beer and wine were the main search terms. While the domestic use of ethyl alcohol was estimated at 12 thousand litres in 2013, by 2019 it had risen to in excess of 2.3 million litres. According to data from the General Directorate of the Turkish Gendarmerie, a total of 248,729 litres of illegal alcoholic beverages were confiscated in the first nine months of 2020, on top of 1,422,291 litres in the last months of 2019. Between 2018 and the end of 2019, domestic alcohol production shrank by 25% from 50 million litres to 40 million.

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This is also evident among younger people and women, who are consuming more alcohol now than they did in the past.

Specifically, [alcohol consumption increased significantly in 2002-2012](#). There were some minor fluctuations in the following years, especially in the transition to 2013, as a result in the main of the government's intense efforts to limit the consumption of alcoholic beverages. More specifically, based on statistics published by Department of Tobacco and Alcohol (Tütün ve Alkol Dairesi Başkanlığı), total alcohol consumption in 2012 stood at 138,000,000 litres, a 5.34% increase compared to 2011. In contrast, alcohol consumption reached 122,000,000 litres in 2013, marking a fall of 11.59% compared with 2012. This significant decline seems to have been related to the government's introduction of new legislation prohibiting alcohol (*alkol yasakları*).

A further small decrease was recorded in 2015, in which 127,000,000 litres of alcohol were consumed. Alcohol consumption decreased by an additional 3.79% in 2014.

However, between 2016 and 2018, an overall increase of 5.98% in alcohol consumption was recorded, while this upward trend continued in the years that followed, especially in 2021. Specifically, in April and May of that year, when the most severe constraints were in force in Turkey in order to constrain the coronavirus, [alcohol consumption increased by 6%](#).

Despite the official narrative stigmatizing alcohol consumption, the fault lines in this ongoing Kulturkampf between the “modern” and the “traditional” and the “moral” and “immoral” are gradually becoming less stark as part of the ongoing hybridization and de facto secularization of Turkish society.

In 2019, the total percentage of alcohol consumers rose to 14.9%, with 23.3% of Turkish men and 6.6% of Turkish women drinking. By age group, the percentage of alcohol users among Turks aged 15-24 stands at 11.4%. This figure rises to 20.7% among people aged 25-34 before falling to 19.8% in the 35-44 age bracket and 14.2% among Turks aged 45-54. The figures for those aged 55-64 and 65-74 are 12.5% and 8.2% respectively. Finally, 2.0% of people over 75 drinks (Turkish Statistical Institute).

Conclusion

While alcohol has been intrinsic to Turkey's path towards modernization since the late Ottoman period, it has acquired a more significant role in the last two decades as an issue which is both reflected in, and instrumentalized by, the country's ongoing *Kulturkampf*.

As part of Turkey's culture war around political and cultural identities and their symbols, alcohol has become one of the many instruments employed to achieve polarization and political consolidation.

The Turkish *Kulturkampf* is deeply anchored in moral projections by which those who consume alcohol are perceived as “modern”, and those who do not consider themselves to be “moral”.

However, and despite the official narrative stigmatizing alcohol consumption, the fault lines in this ongoing *Kulturkampf* between the “modern” and the “traditional” and the “moral” and “immoral” are gradually becoming less stark as part of the ongoing hybridization and de facto secularization of Turkish society.