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TOURISM AS POLITICS: DESTINATION BRANDING, NATIONAL  
IDENTITY, AND ASSESSING TURKEY'S SUPPOSED  
REORIENTATION

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## I. Introduction

In June 2012, with relations between Turkey and Israel at their lowest point in decades, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as he has recently been wont to do, made a series of especially inflammatory public statements about the Jewish state. He ended his speech by dismissing concerns over the recent severing of diplomatic ties, saying that Turkey would not be greatly affected by the loss of its previously close ally. But the issue he chose to address was not Turkey's potential diplomatic isolation, or the joint military exercises that had just been cancelled; instead he framed the break in ties in terms of tourism, saying, "We do not need Israeli tourists. 31 million came to our country last year anyways."<sup>1</sup>

Turkey has evolved rapidly over the past decade, becoming wealthier and more integrated with the rest of the world. An important part of that process of economic and cultural integration is tourism, and the lens of tourism provides a unique and particularly illuminating perspective on both Turkish cultural identity and foreign relations. Connections between tourism and culture are becoming more commonly accepted and applied within the academic community. What is less understood, but what the above quote should make clear, is that studying tourism is a crucial part of understanding, and a creative way to analyze, domestic and foreign policy as well. Tourism advertising (also known as place or destination branding) is often overlooked but is a most revealing and informative factor in exploring the issues above. In this paper, I will use tourism to assess a question asked with increasing regularity and urgency by policymakers and academics alike: is Turkey in the process of a political, cultural, and economic reorientation away from the West and toward the Middle East? And on a related, more specific, point: what has been the effect of recent political upheavals such as the Arab Spring and Gezi Park protests on Turkey's brand in the international tourist market?

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<sup>1</sup> "Israilli turiste ihtiyacimiz yok." 7 June 2012. *Sabah*. 10 March 2014.

This paper on the Turkish tourism industry will incorporate three diverse sources of data: statistical information; an extensive qualitative analysis of advertising materials produced by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; and finally interviews with both policymakers and practitioners in the Turkish tourism industry, as well as tourists themselves. The quantitative data comes from a variety of sources, especially economic data from Turkish governmental agencies. In the second case, tourism advertising materials (in a range of media, including print, web, and television) are examined to see what kind of image Turkey seeks to display abroad. The final element is that of the individuals working on both sides of the tourism industry, both officials with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and tourism professionals and tourists in Istanbul to assess how these strategies play out in practice.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, this paper will explore two interrelated questions: how does Turkey seek to attract international tourists, and for those tourists who do come, why do they do so? The answers to these two overarching questions will allow exploration of the specific policy query mentioned above: is Turkey in the process of a domestic and international political reorientation away from the West/secularism toward the Middle East/Islamism, and how do the above dichotomies help or inhibit our understanding of Turkey today?

We will begin with a survey of the tourism industry in Turkey and its development in the context of Turkish history. This section will also include the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism's plans for Turkey's future, based on the 2007 'Tourism Strategy of Turkey 2023.' We will then consider the Ministry's advertising materials and national destination branding, a

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews were carried out with the General Manager of the Istanbul branch of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Nihar Bekar; former and current department heads of the Ministry office at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC, Murat Karakus and Gorkem Kursunlu Karakus; receptionists, managers and concierges from 4 Istanbul hotels (the World House Hostel; Tunel Residence boutique hotel; Taksim Metropark Hotel; and the Marmara Pera); 25 tourists from 8 countries (Australia, Brazil, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Libya, and the United States).

concept with huge ramifications for a country with as many facets to its identity as Turkey. We will see that the Turkey of tourist advertising is not the ‘East meets West’ setting that dominates academic considerations of modern Turkey. Instead, Turkey is presented as a nation where history and modernity exist side by side and where nature meets civilization, with an emphasis on traditions of Christianity and tolerance. The sum effect is to create a land seemingly full of diversity: a developed, modern country with remarkable natural landscapes, a fascinating history, and a rich spiritual heritage to boot. The most important and indicative sub-brands are Istanbul, the coast, and Cappadocia, areas that epitomize, respectively, modernity, nature, and history. We will assess this campaign using a comparative approach with Greece, Spain, and Azerbaijan, nations with similar tourist identities as Turkey. Finally, we will examine how these dynamics play out on the ground. Interviews with tourists, tourism practitioners, and those who are in charge of executing the Ministry’s strategies reveal that recent domestic and international political upheavals hold both risks and opportunities for Turkey’s tourism potential. The politics surrounding the Arab Spring have made Turkey a much more attractive destination for tourists from the United Arab Emirates to Libya; but the domestic political controversy over the Gezi Park protests and the government’s response have also tarnished Turkey’s image in a way that officials are quick to dismiss but may prove extremely detrimental to Turkey’s long term plans to become a major international tourist destination. In the final assessment, we see a dramatic contradiction: a government increasingly Islamist in orientation propagating a metropolitan image with an emphasis on Christianity; this revelation speaks to the pragmatic nature of the AKP’s neoliberal agenda, and helps to complicate the emerging narrative of Turkey’s ‘Islamization’ under the AKP. But Turkey’s tourism planning seems to be aligned with its former cultural and political trajectory; it remains to be seen how the disconnect between

Turkey's advertising brand and the realities on the ground (both politically and in the tourism sector) might be reconciled in the future. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism represents the final remaining bastion of the AKP's pragmatic wing, a recognition that tourism is too important and valuable to be put at risk by submitting the sector to the same program of Islamization that almost every other facet of Turkish society has undergone in recent years.

## **II. Tourism in Turkey and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism**

Despite its incredible potential, tourism as an industry was not truly developed in Turkey until the 1980s. Nevertheless, through the efforts of a few particularly adventuresome visitors, tourism grew at a slow but steady pace, with annual international arrivals increasing from under 200,000 in 1960 to almost 2 million by 1980.<sup>3</sup> The coup of 1980 brought an end to the violence and instability that had wracked Turkish politics throughout the previous two decades, and the subsequent administration of Turgut Özal similarly stabilized and liberalized the economy. In the words of one official from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkey's economy was "closed" to international tourism and foreign direct investment before Özal's reforms.<sup>4</sup> Özal put a special emphasis on tourism as a means of liberalizing the Turkish economy. The clearest example of this was the 1982 Law for the Encouragement of Tourism (*Turizmi Tesvik Kanunu*), which provided for extremely generous government subsidies for tourism development (hotel construction, for example).<sup>5</sup> According to one Ministry official, in the early 1980s, the government sometimes covered up to 80% of the cost of materials imported for construction, as well as heavily subsidized access to utilities like water and gas.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "İSTATİSTİKLER-TURSAB", TURSAB, <http://www.tursab.org.tr/content/english/statistics/63TSTG.asp>.

<sup>4</sup> Murat Karakus. Former employee, Ministry of Culture and Tourism Office at Embassy of the Republic of Turkey, Washington, D.C. 27 March 2013. Personal Interview.

<sup>5</sup> "Law for the Encouragement of Tourism." Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism. <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN,33040/law-for-the-encouragement-of-tourism.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Gorkem Kursunlu Karakus. Personal Interview. 27 March 2014.

This strategy quickly bore results. Though the transition away from the Atatürk's statism was difficult for many segments of Turkish society, it paved the way for the tourism industry's incredible growth over the next two decades by allowing for huge inflows of foreign capital and expanded opportunities for domestic investment. One Ministry worker recalled watching television in 1987 as a teenager and seeing state-sponsored television advertisements in celebration of Turkey's first year of one million tourist arrivals.<sup>7</sup> Over the next 13 years, tourism arrivals increased by almost 300%, with tourist spending going up by over 400%.<sup>8</sup> Turkey currently ranks as the world's sixth most visited destination, with arrivals having tripled over the past decade, reaching nearly 35 million in 2013.

However, the tourism industry is not as healthy as these numbers suggest; while Turkey is the sixth most visited country, it ranks only twelfth in international tourism receipts.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the fairly homogeneous profile of the tourists and their destinations is perhaps more reflective of the currently unbalanced state of affairs. For most tourists, the attraction of Turkey lies not in its history or culture, but in its beaches, with each nationality focusing on a particular resort area. With around 300 days of sunshine a year along its beautiful coastlines, Turkey is an ideal leisure vacation destination. Furthermore, the luxury resorts that line the coasts are much less expensive than facilities of similar quality in Europeans' home countries. Thus, for the past two decades, Europeans have flocked to Turkey for "three s" getaways: sun, sea, and sand. This type of tourism, because of its low cost and high volume, is known as mass tourism. But the rapid growth of this sector cannot be sustained, nor is its continued expansion something to be desired. First, coastal tourism is nearing the saturation point; the huge influx of vacationing

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<sup>7</sup> Murat Karakus. Personal Interview. 27 March 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2013 Edition,"

[http://dtxqt4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto\\_highlights13\\_en\\_hr.pdf](http://dtxqt4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_highlights13_en_hr.pdf).



Europeans has driven up the cheap prices that made Turkish resorts so attractive in the first place. Second, and more importantly, the Ministry argues that the growth of mass coastal tourism has not been as much of a boon for Turkey as is sometimes portrayed. During a typical tourist's weeklong stay, he or she may not leave the premises of the all inclusive-resort, not even to shop; the local economy may benefit not at all from tourist activities. Thus, mass tourism, as the name implies, is not balanced enough to benefit the Turkish economy and society as a whole. The director of the Istanbul branch of the Ministry said that Turkey now "needs more sophisticated tourists" in order to build a more diverse and sustainable tourist industry.<sup>10</sup>

To move tourism in Turkey away from mass coastal tourism to more economically and socially beneficial forms of tourism, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is setting the goal of a completely diversified industry by 2023, to coincide with the Republic's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>11</sup> Released in late 2007, the 74-page Tourism Strategy of Turkey-2023 is a comprehensive plan by the Ministry to accomplish just this. Recognizing the vast array of 'alternative tourism' opportunities whose potentials are not used in a "rational manner," the Ministry's plan is to "target wiser use of natural, cultural, historical, and geographical assets that [Turkey] has, with a balanced perspective addressing both conservation and utilization needs spontaneously and in an equitable sense and hence leveraging the share of our country from tourism business."<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this, the Ministry has devised a complex series of designations, creating nine tourism development areas, seven thematic corridors, ten tourism cities, and five ecotourism zones. The

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<sup>10</sup> Nihal Bekar. Director, Istanbul Office of Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Personal Interview. 8 January 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Turkey's culture and tourism portfolios have sometimes been separated into two different ministries, a reflection of Turkey's volatile political history and the weak coalition governments that dominated in the 1980s and 1990s; separate Tourism and Culture Ministries were a way to bring more parties into governing coalitions. Since the AKP's victory in 2003 however, and increasing margins of victory in subsequent elections, the two portfolios have been combined under one minister.

<sup>12</sup> "Tourism Strategy of Turkey-2023." Ministry of Culture and Tourism. <http://www.kulturturizm.gov.tr/genel/text/eng/TST2023.pdf>. 10.

planned ‘corridors’ provide a particularly revealing look into just how comprehensive and innovative the Strategy is.

For the Ministry, every facet of the Turkish cultural landscape has tourism potential, even transportation. Thus, certain transportation routes are to be “posited from a tourist viewpoint, due to their richness in terms of natural, historical, and cultural values.”<sup>13</sup> The Strategy calls for some building projects, but mostly utilizes currently existing highways, ports, and rail lines. The seven corridors the ‘Olive Corridor,’ from Bursa to Çanakkale, focusing on health and gastronomy tourism; the ‘Winter Corridor,’ from Ardahan through Ağrı to Erzincan, winter tourism; the ‘Faith Tourism Corridor,’ from Tarsus through Hatay to Mardin, faith tourism; the ‘Silk Road Tourism Corridor,’ from Ankara to Iznik, nature and ecotourism; the ‘Black Sea Coastal Corridor,’ from Sile to Sinop, coastal and nature tourism; the ‘Plateau Corridor,’ from Samsun to Hopa, cultural and nature tourism; and the ‘Thrace Cultural Corridor,’ around Edirne, cultural and ecotourism.<sup>14</sup> The ambitious nature of the plan can be gathered just from the previous examples. Along each of the routes (which span the entire country, from Ağrı on the Iranian border to Edirne, 5 miles from Greece), the Ministry intends to diversify and improve transportation, create incentives for “boutique hotels and boardinghouses,” and, perhaps most ambitiously, “promote and market [the corridors]...as destination points” in and of themselves.<sup>15</sup> The fields of tourism which the Ministry intends to develop are numerous and extraordinarily wide-ranging: “health and thermal tourism, winter sports, mountain climbing and layout tourism, adventure trips, plateau tourism and ecotourism, conference and expo tourism, cruise ship and yacht tourism, and golf tourism” are the stated development priorities.<sup>16</sup> The rationale for this

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<sup>13</sup> “Strategy,” 60.

<sup>14</sup> “Strategy,” 51-55.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.

diversification, beyond the obvious benefit of increased tourist volume, is to extend the tourist season over the entire year.

The Ministry has made the necessary infrastructural and organizational plans to become what it hopes will be one of the world's five largest tourist destinations by 2023. But 'if you build it, they will come' is not enough of a tourist strategy in today's competitive global tourism market. Marketing, on a large scale, is a necessary component of any campaign to encourage tourism, and a crucial part of marketing is branding. The concept of branding, long reserved for the business world, has only recently been applied to the realm of tourism. 'Nation branding' is still a controversial topic, especially for fervent nationalists who believe in the "superior dignity of statehood" of their countries whose "verities are eternal."<sup>17</sup> But every nation in history has been fundamentally altered by changing rulers, regimes, and circumstances. The formation of the Turkish Republic is an exceptionally powerful example of rebranding: a new name for the state and all its citizens, redefining the relationship between state and religion, outlawing old forms of dress, and making the entire populace illiterate with a new alphabet which took years to fully implement. When dealing with an economic activity like tourism, branding is a particularly appropriate term in analyzing nations' tourism campaigns.

What, then, is the Ministry's plan for Turkey's brand? The Strategy is vague: "the ultimate goal [is] branding on a national, regional, and local scale."<sup>18</sup> City branding is a topic of particular import, with the Ministry selecting 15 mid-size cities (Bursa, Gaziantep, and Trabzon to name a few) nationwide for tourism development and promotion. Specific brands for various

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<sup>17</sup> Wally Olins, "Branding the nation: the historical context," *Journal of Brand Management* 9 (2002), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Strategy, 32.

regions are discussed, with particular facets of culture or nature to be emphasized, but the Strategy is silent on what is to be Turkey's all-important "world brand in tourism."<sup>19</sup>

Without an explicit statement from the Ministry, the best way to determine Turkey's self-established brand, and its relationship with Turkish culture, is by analyzing the Ministry's websites, printed materials, and television commercials. The Ministry seeks to balance Turkey's current tourist profile (relaxation and coastal mass tourism) with a more diversified image that appeals to the sophisticated tourist that Turkey hopes to attract. Collectively, tourist images of Turkey show a bustling, Western nation with unspoiled nature, remarkably preserved history, and a rich Christian heritage. Of these, the most important is Christianity, because it at once places Turkey in the Western cultural tradition, sets Turkey apart from its Mediterranean tourism competitors, and brands Turkey as a diverse, multicultural nation.

### **III. Destination Branding and Turkish Identity**

Tourism advertisements promote specific images of Turkish national identity into order to sell an experience and the nation. Explicitly, promotional tourism materials may be a more economic than political exercise, but state-created tourism advertisements manifest fundamentally political narratives of each nation's self-understandings and identities. Bringing discussions of the politics of tourism to an often-overlooked region, this section deconstructs tourism videos and other promotional materials in order to construct Turkish national identity narratives. The greater implications for such tourism identity narratives relies on the knowledge that identities and international relations are mutually or reciprocally constructed. Through golfing scenes, smiling princesses, and tribal music, Turkey situates itself in a global dialogue on what "Turkey" means to the outside world. This national narrative, and the national identities and self-understandings it includes, also has larger political implications for how Turkey is situated on the edge of Europe

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13.

and in relation to European-style modernity.<sup>20</sup> From fire shrines to water skiing, tourism advertisements highlight the nuances between Turkey national narratives and position regarding the West.

### **Sources and Methodology**

In order to better understand how the Turkish state has constructed national self-understandings and identities, this section analyses the content of a number of printed materials, websites, and over sixty videos from the official ministry YouTube channels. The video form provides audio and visual sources to analyse how each state portrays its nation. Both the implicit message of musical choice and explicit messages in narration provide information on how the state is constructing the nation. Taking the same form of Turkish constructions, the content promotes a “handful of ideas”<sup>21</sup> and “simple values” which are “true” to Turkey.<sup>22</sup> Tourism marketing therefore distils complex national self-understandings into a few key motifs that seek to resonate with potential tourists and relate to the nation itself.

In line with tourism marketing tactics, there are prevalent and meaningful core values that run throughout the majority of video advertisements. In addition, one can identify other “gimmicks” or very specific and well-known traits that are unique to Turkey. These tropes may not be central to the state’s national identity (for example, the Statue of Liberty may not be central to being “American”), but they remain important symbols when presenting the nation to the outside world. Both core values and other tropes contribute to national narratives, but this study focuses on the most salient and most pervasive motifs.

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<sup>20</sup> This study deals primarily with “European-style” modernity or “Euro-modernity.” This modernity emphasises industrialization, capitalism, economic development, and ‘Western’ culture.

<sup>21</sup> Nigel Morgan, Annette Pritchard, and Roger Pride, *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation* (Boston: Elsevier, 2011), 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Turkey projects certain national narratives to the outside world through tourism advertisements; without explicitly addressing a political audience, Turkey's national narratives are not directly entangled with elite-level politics. Targeting foreign individuals and not foreign governments, state produced tourism advertisements reflect state interests but largely avoid considerations of high politics. For this reason, the national narratives in tourism advertisements provide a perhaps less politicized reflection of Turkish national narratives than other sources.

Deviating from most explicitly political documents, tourism advertisements target a distinctly different audience. Any analysis of advertisements requires the researcher to ask whom the advertisements are targeting and what is being sold. In the case of tourism advertisements, a place (in this case, Turkey) is the product and the audience is the potential tourist. Tourism advertisements promote the consumption of experiences as much as they advance certain understandings of a nation. In this paper, the audience is further refined to international tourists. Furthermore, the study focuses on the English-language tourism advertisements, limiting the audience to the Anglophone tourism market.<sup>23</sup> By further focusing on state-produced advertisements from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, these products reflect the state's self-understanding of its nation.<sup>24</sup> Coming from the elite level and somewhat streamlined through official ministry channels, state-produced advertisements reflect national identities as conceptualized from above.

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<sup>23</sup> Beyond native English-speakers from places like England, English-language advertisements also reach an international audience in places like airports or travel agencies that may have English-language advertising targeting non-native English speakers. For example, the "GoTurkey!" campaign was used across Europe, in places like Germany.

<sup>24</sup> Here self-understanding indicates that the state is creating its own self-understanding of the nation. The use of self-understanding here should not be interpreted as if other forces are not influencing the state portrayal. As opposed to 'identity,' self-understanding indicates that agency lies with the state itself and that the state is recognised as the 'author' of these narratives. This should not indicate these ministries produce the advertisements but that the state ministries control the process and which advertisements are selected for state-funded tourism campaigns.

While the advertisements are used as a window in Turkish national self-understandings, these self-understandings are equally reflective of how Turkish officials imagine outsiders want to see Turkey. As one tourism marketing text suggests, “a destination’s communities, stakeholders, and leaders can still have a vision of how they want to see it and how they want it to be seen.”<sup>25</sup> This means that the portrayals of Turkey in tourism advertisements cannot be taken as pure expressions of national identities. In fact, tourism advertisements reflect a very specific reflection of national identity in an idealised –and theoretically appealing –form. For example, Turkish advertisements featuring a flying carpet do not indicate a plenary self-understanding of Turkey as a mystical, non-modern society.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this type of advertisement would indicate Turkey’s understanding that non-Turkish, likely Western, tourists would be attracted by such images of Turkey as an exotic, mystical locale. Far from an obvious portrayal of national self-identity, tourism advertisements show the national identities which a state believes others find appealing. To an extent, officials put each state’s “best foot forward,” highlighting the aspects of the state they are most proud of. On the other hand, such national portrayals perpetuate non-indigenous national self-understandings, which can be contrary to, or even offensive towards, internal national self-understandings. For such reasons the audience is critically important. Tourism advertising provides the researcher with portrayals of self-understanding through a double-lens of a native portrayal of a non-native understanding of the nation. While elite-constructed tourism advertisements are an engaging window into national identities and self-understanding, any discussion must consider the intended audience of such portrayals of Turkishness.

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<sup>25</sup> Morgan, et al., 67.

<sup>26</sup> “Country of Heaven,” Expo2015Izmir. 1 January 2008. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwZ0qnz5v9s&feature=plcp>.

Mindful of the tourism audience, each narrative emphasizes certain elements within its internal narrative of national identity. Turkey's less attractive qualities, everything from subpar tourism facilities to the Turkish government's often heavy-handed suppression of public protest, are excluded through an "active process of omission."<sup>27</sup> Beyond the oversight of such negative traits however, tourism advertisements also exhibit more subtle biases that can indicate the relative importance of certain elements of national identity and self-understanding. For instance, within this study's survey of tourism advertisements, advertisement producers exaggerate Christian influences in Turkey, underplay Islam's dominance, and largely ignore Judaism. While all religions have had some continuous role in Turkish national identity formation, the relative emphasis reflects the dual concerns of audienceship and commerciality as Turkish elites construct "Turkishness" in tourism materials.

The consideration of audience begs the researcher to ask if portrayals of national identity and self-understanding reflect native or non-native conceptualisations of the nation. The consideration of commerciality likewise requires the researcher to acknowledge that while materials promote a certain national self-understanding, and this portrayal of national self-understanding has direct economic goals. Tourism advertisements are a valuable window into national identities and self-understandings, but cannot be considered an isolated or complete image of how Turkish elites construct national narratives.

These two monumental considerations challenge the utility of tourism advertisements as anything more than an expression of manipulated national identity seeking to please tourists and enrich indigenous elites. However, no portrayal of national identity exists in a vacuum. Like any national parade, state-sponsored art exhibit, embassy party, or government publication, tourism advertisements are constructed, re-constructed, and contested arenas of national identity and self-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 171.



understanding formation. Considerations of audience and economic motives are important in analyzing tourism material, but by no means unique to such sources. Hardly existing in a vacuum, the portrayals of national identity and self-understanding cannot be separated from considerations of audience and commerciality, but should also be considered participants in larger dialogues on national identity. Without suggesting strict causal mechanisms, tourism advertisements are nonetheless participants in larger dialogues constructing national identity and self-understanding.

### **Turkish Narratives of Self-Identity**

While Turkish officials portray Turkey as balancing understandings of Eastern history and Western modernity, Turkey's advertisements are far less expository, take Turkey's modernity for granted, and promote many known activities in a Turkish context. In the case of Turkish advertisements, its substantial tourism industry projects a more confident image of Turkish modernity, treating Turkish history as a corollary to modern pursuits and activities. While the fundamental trait is modernity, Turkish tourism advertisements also emphasize nature, history and, in recognition of what currently drives Turkey's tourist sector, relaxation.

Modernity is the key trait to Turkey's tourism identity, a kind of background on top of which the unique traits of Turkish culture are presented. This is something the Ministry has stated explicitly, urging that promotion efforts should "stress modern values."<sup>28</sup> A full third of the rotating set of twelve images on the Office of Turkish Culture and Tourism's website are of modern settings: bustling Istiklal Street at night, a fashionable restaurant under the glittering Bosphorus Bridge, a luxury cruise ship in Istanbul's harbor, and another of Bosphorus Bridge with the classical Ortoköy Mosque in the foreground.<sup>29</sup> From these images, the first presented to a

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<sup>28</sup> Morgan, et al., 25

<sup>29</sup> [www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org), Turkish Culture and Tourism Office

prospective tourist searching for destinations online, it is clear that Istanbul has been chosen as the symbol of Turkey's place in the modern world, with Bosphorus Bridge a representation of progress and technological achievement. The bridge obviously has certain connotations of East-West connections, but the emphasized trait is modernity. Turkey's decision to emphasize its modern traits may appear strange, given that branding is primarily an effort to appear unique and distinctive. However, Turkey is still an emerging tourist spot, misunderstood by or even completely unknown to Western visitors. Establishing Turkey as a part of the developed world is necessary to make these tourists comfortable, assuaging fears they may have about visiting 'the Middle East' and demonstrating that Turkey has many of the services and comforts they expect in their home countries.

Turkey's relatively modern portrayal is also seen in auxiliary claims made by those constructing tourism advertisements. Turkey makes relatively few claims about its basic suitability for tourism, instead focusing on the variety and luxury of specific activities. For instance, Turkey is making more advanced arguments about five-star hotels perfect for business meetings<sup>30</sup> or specific activities that some may not know were available in Turkey, like golf.<sup>31</sup> The Turkish tourism office published "special interest" promotional videos including "blue voyages," golf, rafting, "meetings and incentives," and winter sport materials.<sup>32</sup> Nightclubs and

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<sup>30</sup> "Special Interest- Meeting and Incentives," TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSpZBJ-ym0c&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=3>.

<sup>31</sup> "Special Interest- Golf in Turkey," TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvoZlq3C8VY&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvoZlq3C8VY&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=1).

<sup>32</sup> "Special Interest- Blue Voyage;" "Special Interest- Golf in Turkey;" "Special Interest -Rafting Turkey;" TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWf-EFrQ2lQ&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=2>  
"Special Interest- Meeting and Incentives,"

"Special Interest -Winter Sports," TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p6l\\_h\\_4IPM&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p6l_h_4IPM&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=4).

specific discussions of nightlife in Turkey similarly underscore a completely modern aspect to Turkish tourism.<sup>33</sup>

The next parts of Turkey's tourism brand are also traditional parts of the Western tourist diet: nature and history, the two components of the nineteenth century Romanticism's reaction against modernity. In her book on the Cappadocian tourist village of Goreme, Hazel Tucker, citing the influence of Romanticism on tourism, divides the Western tourist's motivations into the cult of nature and the cult of history or the primitive.<sup>34</sup> Cappadocia features prominently in the promotion of both of these, representing one of the most important sub-brands of Turkey's tourist identity. Some scene or aspect of Cappadocia appears in nearly every tourist image produced for Turkey: the Office site features a balloon over the world famous fairy chimneys, while other publications include scenes from Goreme's rock-cut churches. Cappadocia's famous Dark Church merits a sweeping 3 second shot in the Ministry's frenetic 30-second television advertisement to be shown abroad.<sup>35</sup>

Turkey also utilizes its coasts to project itself as home to unspoiled natural landscapes. As with the Cappadocia hot air balloon image, many of these images show human interaction with nature, like the Ministry and Office sites' images of parasailing at the beach in Fethiye and tour boats traveling down a river. One image on the Office site, of Mt. Agri in the east, is clearly taken to resemble the Alps, with the snow-capped peaks of Anatolia providing a backdrop for a startlingly green scene of rolling hills and deciduous trees. Beach scenes are included in the

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<sup>33</sup> Nightlife is featured in videos such as: "Turkey Promotional Video," "Go Turkey TV Commercial," "Destination Turkey –Explore it!" GoTurkeyl. 21 March 2012. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEvGcEqKemo&feature=plcp>; "Go Turkey Picture frame and Istanbul," Etravelturkey. 3 March 2008. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTtOIfERHKc&feature=plcp>; "Special Interest-Blue Voyage;" and "Destination Spotlight-The Aegean," TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIDvwZhJbmg&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=9>.

<sup>34</sup> Hazel Tucker, *Living with Tourism: Negotiating Identities in a Turkish Village* (Routledge, London: 2003), 26.

<sup>35</sup> "[30 Second Tourism Advertisement]," Ministry of Culture and Tourism, accessed via Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2rHjepdDBs&feature=related>

overwhelming majority of videos surveyed, including references to swimming, boating, and relaxing on the beach. Of the three 2010 advertisements by Global Advertising Strategies for New York's Times Square, two feature Turkey's coasts, beach-side cabanas, boating, and swimming. "Turkey in Times Square 2010 Ad # 3" and "Turkey in Times Square 2010 Ad # 2" both begin with stunning scenes of Turkey's coastline.<sup>36</sup> The majority of Turkish advertisements include a scene of coastal relaxation, whether it is lounging on the beach, swimming, or boating. In ads such as "Go Turkey 2008," images of recognizable places like Cappadocia and Efes are mixed with images of modern boats, bright blue water, and pristine beaches.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, tourism officials emphasise this tropical relaxation theme in "Go Turkey TV Commercial;" with on-screen text of "Turquoise calling" as boats, scuba diving, and other tropical delights are showcased in this one minute advertisement.<sup>38</sup> "Go Turkey My Antalya" represents a similar image of Turkey as the ideal coastal vacation as images of a perfect coastline are interspersed with exotic Turkish food, jet skis, beaches, and golf images.<sup>39</sup> While diverse (representing tourist destinations from İstanbul in the West to Nemrut Dağı Turkey's far East), Turkish tourism national identity is rooted in the idea of nature, relaxation and sunny enjoyment.

Turkey offers natural features of coastal areas as part of Turkey's unique access to a variety of coastlines and relaxing beaches. The emphasis on beach leisure emphasises how Turkey understands the foreign consumer. Focusing on sunny vacations spent boating,

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<sup>36</sup> "Turkey in Times Square 2010 Ad #3," :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4RnSD00MoY&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&index=2&feature=plcp>  
"Turkey in Times Square 2010 Ad # 2."

The exception is the "Turkey in Times Square 2010 Ad # 1" which shows inland Cappadocia.

<sup>37</sup> "GO TURKEY 2008," NaCar76. 7 May 2008. : [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_pQ5jhQmkxU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pQ5jhQmkxU).

<sup>38</sup> "Go Turkey TV Commercial," TristarTVLtd. 9 September 2010. :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umBFf9wNiQk>.

<sup>39</sup> "Go Turkey My Antalya,," Etravelturkey. 3 March 2008. :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OijjNwb2gz0&feature=plcp>.

swimming, or on a “blue voyage” in a private yacht,<sup>40</sup> Turkey presents the more appealing and marketable side of Turkey. The relative focus on Turkish coasts and beaches highlights both what Turkey naturally has to offer tourists and a realistic assessment of why many who currently come to Turkey do so, and what Turkey’s main source of tourism revenue has historically been.

Turkey’s focus on contemporary and beach activities does situate Turkey in a more clearly modern understanding of “Turkishness” but does not ignore historical sites such as Nemrut Dağı or Ayasofya. The Turkish case presents a Turkish national self-understanding as a contemporary coastal escape from the business of modern life, without questioning or defending Turkey’s modernity.

Turkish advertisements promote very specific images of history amidst other modern images. The most prominent heritage sights are featured in nearly every tourism video. The Efes (Ephesus) ruins, Pamukkale, Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia), Cappadocia, Sultanahamet Cami (the Blue Mosque), and Nemrut Dağı all make their way into tourist advertisements. These sights, recognized by the UNESCO, if not the general foreign public, serve as touch-stones of Turkish history. Turkish self-understanding conceptualises history less as a starting point and more as a catalogue from which to pick the most appealing elements to sell to a foreign audience. This results in a prominent role for historical sites in tourism advertising, but it is certainly less integral to the Turkish self-understandings seen in tourism videos than it is for other nations. For example, images of İstanbul always include the iconic Ayasofya as a modern museum surrounded by a modern city. Similarly, one advertisement surrounds images of Efes with scuba diving, boating, and golf images. Historical places are seen as a unique feature amidst normal modern life.

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<sup>40</sup> “Special Interest- Blue Voyage,” TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxMUN0Bfeww&feature=BFa&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA>.

While Turkish national self-understandings and identities in tourism advertisements appear to be more completely situated in Turkey's understanding of European modernity, there is a paradoxical emphasis on Turkey's unique history. Turkish advertising includes a much more specific understanding of history. Traditional dances and cuisine appear in a variety of advertisements under the "Go Turkey" campaign.<sup>41</sup> Prominent in the "Go Turkey Cappadocia" advertisement more than other focused advertisements, horseback riding, traditional textiles, historic churches, regional dances, and handmade pottery construct an image of Turkey seeped in history and removed from modern urban life.<sup>42</sup> However, this advertisement's focus on Cappadocia is exceptional when compared to the larger body of Turkish advertisements. While most advertisements do show at least some images of Cappadocia, the history and tradition seen in the "Go Turkey Cappadocia" advertisement is always placed among more urban and contemporary scenes. For example, the 2010 video celebrating İstanbul's election of the European Capital of Culture featured modern rock music, bustling streets, inventors, urban bird-feeding, a dreadlocked passerby, street musicians, a fashion show, and a modern business neighborhood.<sup>43</sup> Videos emphasise history, but (in a surprisingly literal way) as an active participant in the modern landscape. Dervishes are prominent and show up in videos like the "Turkey Promotional Video" from 2009.<sup>44</sup> In the one video for the İstanbul campaign in 2009, a mounted Ottoman warrior rides through İstanbul, traditional dancers and musicians play on the tops of mosques, dervishes twirl in the Bosphorus, and soldiers gallop into the modern metro before the slogan "İstanbul: Timeless City" is superimposed on a traditionally dressed woman in

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<sup>41</sup> "Go Turkey TV Commercial."

"Go Turkey," Etravelturkey. 3 March 2008. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTtOIfERHKc&feature=plcp>.

<sup>42</sup> "Go Turkey Cappadocia," Etravelturkey. 3 March 2008. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2nLw06FQ8M&feature=plcp>.

<sup>43</sup> "İstanbul 2010 Promo Video," TurkeyTourismOffice. 7 December 2009. :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWOHPJBaoeY&feature=BFa&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqe8UaA>.

<sup>44</sup> "Turkey Promotional Video."

a sea of carpets.<sup>45</sup> Turkish projections of national self-understandings incorporate history as active, though not determinant, force in modern life. Similarly, a 2006 promotional video features modern tourists in historical locations. Modern tourists are served an enormous Ottoman meal and a contemporary woman lounges in a historic building, casting history as an active but not domineering figure in portrayals of modern Turkishness.<sup>46</sup> The Turkish narrative focuses on similar core values and has the same aim to show its unique traits, both naturally and historically. However, Turkey's core values of leisure and a dynamic history woven into modern Turkey create a much more confident and Euro-modern understanding of Turkish identity.

Every nation seeks to draw tourists by claiming a long and rich history; but few countries have as much history as Turkey. Some maintain that Turkey is the longest continually inhabited country on earth; regardless of that claim's veracity, Turkey has been occupied by a kaleidoscopic range of ethnic, religious, and political groups over the past ten millennia. In fact, the 'Turks' are relative newcomers to Turkey, having arrived from Central Asia in Anatolia only in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Still, with such a rich patrimony, history is bound to have a large part in any marketing campaign, especially one focusing on cultural tourism as a means of diversification. From the all-important Ministry's sites rotating set of images, a full third are of historical sites: Mount Nemrut's monumental 1<sup>st</sup> century BC Greek sculptures, a mosaic of Christ from Hagia Sophia, and the Celsus Library in Ephesus. The cover of one of the largest tourist guides from recent years contains, along with Cappadocia's fairy chimneys and the crystal clear waters of a southwest beach, Mount Nemrut and the Versailles-esque Ceremonial Hall of

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<sup>45</sup> "TV Commercials- Istanbul," TurkeyTourismOffice. 25 June 2009. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8F1EFkFRRY&feature=autoplay&list=UUW0dsEiBX9Xg02JePqc8UaA&playnext=13>.

<sup>46</sup> "Turkey Tourism Clip," Vissi87. 22 September 2006. : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2rHjepdDBs>.

Dolmabahçe Palace.<sup>47</sup> That same brochure boasts Turkey as, “between 2000 BC and 1500 AD...the center of world civilization.”<sup>48</sup> Conspicuously absent from this consideration of Turkish history, as well as web and television images, is the Ottoman Empire, the state that was the center of the Islamic and Turkic worlds for four centuries. In its place, Turkey’s Christian heritage has been brought to the forefront of its tourist identity.

### **Christianity and Turkish Advertising in Comparative Perspective**

Turkey, in promoting its historical sites, only showcases those with Greco-Roman or Christian significance. And while Turkey has more Greek and Roman sites than Greece or Italy, the latter nations are so associated with these classical civilizations in the Western tourist consciousness that Turkey has chosen to not make this the lynchpin of its tourist strategy. Instead, it has seized upon the long and storied Christian past of Turkey. Imaging Christianity in Turkey consists largely of Turkey’s sizable Byzantine heritage. For example, a majestic Christ Pantocrator from a Byzantine mosaic or fresco often stares at prospective tourists from the cover of a brochure. One such portrait of Christ, from Hagia Sophia, peers at viewers from above the text of the Turkish Culture and Tourism Office’s site.<sup>49</sup> The Ministry television commercial features several clips of such iconography, including a lengthy view of the Virgin and Child from Kariye Camii (the Byzantine Chora Church) and multiple views of Hagia Sophia’s mosaics.<sup>50</sup> One of the most important elements of this new ‘faith’ tourism (a subset of cultural tourism) in Turkey is the St. Paul trail, a heavily publicized facet of Turkey’s Christian heritage. The Office’s site admonishes visitors “You don’t need to go to Rome!”, using Pope Benedict’s declaration of 2008 as the year

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<sup>47</sup> “Go with the rhythm” Brochure, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2006, [cover].

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>49</sup> [www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org)

<sup>50</sup> “[30 Second Tourism Advertisement],” Ministry of Culture and Tourism, accessed via Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2rHjepdDBs&feature=related>



of St. Paul to highlight the apostle's history in the country.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, a lengthy pamphlet, "A Journey in Turkey with St. Paul," has been published and made widely available by the Ministry; it begins with the words "Turkey was the setting for some of the most important events in the history of Christianity," a claim any theologian or historian would be hard pressed to reject.<sup>52</sup> Emphasizing Christianity serves several important purposes. First, it puts Turkey firmly in the Western cultural and religious tradition; this campaign has, in effect, branded Turkey as the birthplace of Christianity. The St. Paul pamphlet has a lengthy "Did you know?" section which informs readers that Turkey was where Noah's Ark landed after the Flood (at Mt. Ararat or Ağrı), where Abraham was born (at Şanlıurfa), where the first seven Churches of Christianity (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyateira, Sardes, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) and two of the five Patriarchates (Constantinople and Antioch) were located, and is home to the oldest Church on earth (at Antioch, a claim now largely disputed by scholars).<sup>53</sup> Having played such a vital role in the development of Christianity, Turkey is positioning itself as arguably the originator of Western cultural and intellectual life.

Secondly, and more importantly from a branding perspective, Turkey's Christian-themed tourist promotions set it apart from its rivals in the extremely competitive Mediterranean tourist market. Greece, Italy, and relative newcomer Spain are all established brands in tourism, with fairly similar tourist profiles as Turkey: all boast beautiful Mediterranean coastlines, long histories rooted in the classical age, flavorful cuisines, and most importantly hospitality, which has been described as "actively constitutive, rather than simply a component, of the stereotype of Mediterranean culture."<sup>54</sup> Emphasizing Christianity sets Turkey apart in a way easily accessible

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<sup>51</sup> [www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org)

<sup>52</sup> "A Journey in Turkey with St. Paul," Pamphlet, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>54</sup> Tucker, 118

for Western tourists. It has already been noted that the Office's website has a prominent advertisement telling visitors explicitly not to go to Italy to celebrate the year of St. Paul. The goal is not to focus on tourists whose sole motivation is Christian history, though clearly that group subset's interest will be provoked by the campaign. Instead, the focus on Christianity distinguishes Turkey from other Mediterranean nations which do not publicize any Christian heritage they have.

Azerbaijan presents yet another natural point of comparison: Turkey and Azerbaijan are both Muslim Turkic nations on the periphery of Europe seeking to broaden their participation in the international tourist market. Their approaches to destination branding, however, could not be further apart. The divergent national narratives between the Azerbaijani and Turkish cases demonstrate a desire to persuade the West of Turkey's relatively close relationship to Europe, whether it is through its economic development or other projections of European-style modernity. Compared to Azerbaijani narratives which emphasize European ambitions and the implicit necessity of significant further growth, Turkish advertisements highlight Turkey's reciprocally constructed role as an uncontested participant in European modernity. A comparison of both the physical and discursive characteristics of tourism in Turkey and Azerbaijan emphasises Turkey's ability to attractively market itself and project its European-style modernity to an international audience.

The narratives created by Turkish and Azerbaijani officials through tourism videos construct similar understandings of Turkish and Azerbaijani identity. However, these narratives differ in their relative emphasis on natural exceptionalism and the relationship between national histories and participation in European-style modernity. Azerbaijani's national narrative emphasises exotic natural exceptionalism and a transition from Oriental histories to European

modernity. The narrative highlights concepts such as transitions, development, an exotic past, and supernatural nature. While images of modernity are present in Azerbaijan's national narrative, these elements contrast with the dominating themes of a mystical, oriental history and an almost supernatural natural landscape. This portrayal of Azerbaijan firmly situates it into a non-modern category. While defending and promoting its modernity, tourism advertisements highlight that foreigners need to be reassured that Azerbaijan has roads, airplanes, hotels, and other basic elements of tourism infrastructure; foreigners are not expected to take basic transportation and hospitality services for granted in Azerbaijan.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond differences in assumed infrastructure, the Azerbaijani and Turkish narratives situate each state in a dramatically different position in regards to European-style modernity more generally. This divergent portrayal towards an international and largely Western audience indicates both Turkey's relatively developed economic infrastructure as well as an external understanding that Turkey is more "European" and therefore more modern. Both states balance historical and modern images. However, Turkish elites project an image of unquestionable modernity through tourism advertisements and attempt to situate Turkey in a European framework in the eyes of Western observers. On the other hand, Azerbaijani advertisements' emphasis on development distances Azerbaijan. Reflecting each state's ability to project European-style modernity, the disparate national narratives reinforce each Turkey and Azerbaijan's relative positions on the European periphery. Whereas Azerbaijani tourism advertisements made specific arguments about its ambitions and future place in European-style

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<sup>55</sup> "Azerbaijan –A Land of Magic Colours," Azerbaijan tourismaz.27 December 2010. : [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jk8c-xnKg14&feature=bf\\_next&list=UUSYJtYmR7HLNaJ8i\\_KzxJ3g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jk8c-xnKg14&feature=bf_next&list=UUSYJtYmR7HLNaJ8i_KzxJ3g). "Baku," Azerbaijan tourismaz.27 December 2010. : [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbhoBpCxrJc&feature=bf\\_next&list=UUSYJtYmR7HLNaJ8i\\_KzxJ3g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbhoBpCxrJc&feature=bf_next&list=UUSYJtYmR7HLNaJ8i_KzxJ3g).

modernity, Turkey outlines a variety of typical, contemporary activities, without the same need to justify or defend its modernity.

As seen in tourism advertisements, this divergent understanding of how Azerbaijan and Turkey are situated in relation to European-style modernity reflects largely discursive, but not necessarily physical, indicators. For example, Azerbaijan's literacy and secondary education rates surpass Turkey's and Azerbaijan has an equally if not more developed Western arts scene. Nevertheless, regardless of such measures, Turkey and Azerbaijan's national self-understandings participate in processes that cast Turkey as relatively modern and European nation.

Turkey's economic strength and integration into European structures in the twentieth century cast Turkey as confidently modern nation, while Azerbaijan's mystical nature and development aspirations construct very different relations with European-style modernity. Through the discourse of Turkish and Azerbaijani tourism materials, Azerbaijan is situated on the distant European periphery while Turkish narratives confidently assume Turkey is a modern and developed destination engaging with European standards and European modernity. While both Azerbaijani and Turkish advertisements appear to place Euro-modernity as a goal, the differences between Azerbaijani and Turkish narratives situate Azerbaijan in a subordinate position in a more distant European periphery. Despite similar constructions that combine historical and modern images, the national narratives seen in tourism advertisements suggest Azerbaijan and Turkey occupy fundamentally different spaces with respect to modernity.

#### **IV. Tourism Strategies and Branding in Practice**

We have seen that the Turkish government is seeking to diversify its tourism industry, appealing to a different range of consumers, particularly those who will stay longer and spend more in the country. To assess the extent to which the Ministry has been successful in this effort, we will

look at both quantitative and qualitative data, from official government statistics to interviews carried out with international tourists in Istanbul in January 2014. We will use this information to assess the initial policy query, about Turkey's supposed turn under AKP rule away from Europe toward the Middle East. We will see that Turkey does seem to be successful in its diversification efforts, with increases in arrivals during non-traditional times of year and from non-traditional (read: non-Western European) nations. However, although tourism officials have been quick to downplay the impact of last summer's Gezi Park protests, they had a measurable effect on the Turkish tourism industry. The growing importance of Arab tourism, which is confirmed in this data as well as in the Turkish government's aggressive courting of the Arab tourism market, is a fact that can be seen on the ground in cities throughout Turkey today.

### **Diversification**

Though it has only been 7 years since the Ministry's 2023 Strategy was formulated, many early signs indicate that Turkey has made significant progress toward its ultimate goal of a diversified tourism industry. Many of the specialized sectors Turkey has sought to attract have shown particular growth. For example, in the sector of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibition (MICE) tourism, Istanbul now ranks ninth worldwide, and first in the world for conferences with over 500 participants.<sup>56</sup> Former Tourism and Culture Minister Ertugrul Gunay explained why MICE tourism is being targeted for development: "it can be active throughout the year, and one congress participant spends three times more money than the average tourist."<sup>57</sup> Golf is another rising sector; in an interview with the author, the director of the Istanbul branch of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism repeatedly returned to golf, citing various statistics,

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<sup>56</sup> "Convention tourism on the rise in Turkey," *Today's Zaman*. 13 April 2014. <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-344581-convention-tourism-on-the-rise-in-turkey.html>.

<sup>57</sup> "Unlimited Ambition" *The Business Year*. 2012.

<http://www.thebusinessyear.com/publication/article/9/1048/turkey-2012/unlimited-ambition>

tournaments and awards that demonstrate Turkey's status as an emerging market for international golf tourism.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the clearest indicator that the Turkish tourism industry is becoming more diversified is the growth of tourist arrivals by month over the past 3 years. From 2010-2013, the fastest growing months were the first four months of the year; i.e. those that are the least visited. January and February saw particular growth in those 3 years, with international arrivals rising 36.4% and 32.9%, respectively; annual arrivals in those years only increased 9.84%. July, the most visited month, was also the slowest growing, at 5.4%.<sup>59</sup> But diversification is not limited only to sector and time of arrival; the profile of the tourists who come to Turkey is also changing, and looking at trends in tourists' countries of origin is the best way to examine the impact of the Gezi Park protests, the Arab Spring, and Turkey's purported turn away from Europe toward the Muslim world.

### **Impact of Gezi Park**

In the early morning of May 28, 2013, Turkish police forcefully evicted several dozen environmentalists who had been holding a protest in Istanbul's Gezi Park, a small green area slated for demolition as part of the government's plan to construct a large shopping mall in Istanbul's iconic Taksim Park. The sit-in had not attracted much attention domestically in Turkey, let alone internationally, but the heavy handed police response (seen as typical of the current government's approach to popular criticism) sparked a response from across Turkish civil society. For the next week, huge crowds poured into the streets of Istanbul and cities across Turkey, with clashes breaking out between police and protestors in which several people were killed. The Gezi Park protests were Turkey's greatest political upheaval since the 1980s, and

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<sup>58</sup> Personal Interview. Nihar Bekar. 6 January 2014.

<sup>59</sup> All statistics compiled from

attracted worldwide attention. The protests' impact on tourism market, however, remains a question of great contention.

In interviews, all officials from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism became visibly uncomfortable when the issue of Gezi was raised; the director of the Istanbul branch of the Ministry went so far as to cut off the question (as if she anticipated it) and moved on to another topic.<sup>60</sup> In each case, to the extent they addressed Gezi directly, they dismissed both its long and short term impact on tourism in Turkey. While the long-term impact is yet to be seen, the short term impact was fairly clear: Gezi greatly depressed arrivals from the United States and Western Europe, while arrivals from other regions were largely unaffected.

For June 2013, the first full month after Gezi began and during which the protests were on-going for several months, nearly every major Western nation saw decreases in arrivals compared with June 2012. Arrivals from Germany, the country that has long been Turkey's largest source of visitors, decreased by nearly 8%; the second largest nation in Western Europe, Great Britain, saw a decrease of 2.2%. Overall, from the EU, the decrease for June 2013 was almost 3%. The United States saw an even greater fall, of 9.4%. Outside of Western Europe, however, there appears to have been no impact. Arrivals from Russia increased by a healthy 12.6%; the Middle East and Africa grew by 29.2% and 15.3%, respectively, driven by strong growth from Algeria, Libya (more below), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. These trends continued in July 2013, when arrivals from Europe fell by 3.5% compared to the previous year. Contemporaneous news reports and interviews with tourism practitioners confirm the fact that Gezi had a substantial impact on those sectors of the tourism market geared toward Europeans. Employees at both lower-end hostels and luxury hotels confirmed that the curfews, tear gas, and street violence that accompanied the Gezi protests caused a major downturn in tourism for the

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<sup>60</sup> Personal Interview. Nihal Bekar. 8 January 2014.

summer of 2013, with many tourists cutting their visits short and many more choosing not to come to Turkey in the first place.<sup>61</sup> On June 5, 2013, at the height of the protests, a spokesman for a Turkish hotel industry group stated that 40% of hotel reservations had been cancelled or postponed because of the on-going unrest in Istanbul.<sup>62</sup>

### **Increasing Arab Influence**

Over the past several years, policymakers, commenters and academics have been asking (as a Voice of America story put it in October of last year), ‘is Turkey turning away from the West?’<sup>63</sup> Those who answer affirmatively cite the foundering EU accession process, Turkey’s increasing assertive political and economic role in the Middle East, AKP authoritarianism, and growing conservatism at the societal level as evidence. They would do well to look to tourism for yet another piece of evidence for this argument.

In terms of data, few countries have increased their participation in the Turkish tourism market than those of the Middle East and North Africa. Over the past decade, arrivals from Egypt have increased 363%; Morocco, 501%; the UAE 680%; Saudi Arabia, 894%, and Kuwait, 977%. In each case, much of the growth came since 2011. Libya is a particularly good example of the impact of the Arab Spring on Turkish tourism. About 28,000 Libyans came to Turkey in 2003; this number remained fairly constant through 2011, when 53,562 visited. 2011, of course, saw the Libyan Civil War and the fall of Muammer Gaddafi; after initially expressing reservations about foreign intervention, Turkey was an early supporter of the National Transitional Council and played a prominent role in the NATO operation against the Gaddafi

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<sup>61</sup> Individuals interviewed were Rabia Gunes, Manager at World House Hostel, Personal Interview on 4 January 2014 and Soner Yildiz, receptionist at Marmara Pera Hotel, Personal Interview on 7 January 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Gunes Komurculer, 5 June 2013, *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/protests-hit-tourism-but-create-new-tourists.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48223&NewsCatID=349>.

<sup>63</sup> Jamie Dettmer, “Is Turkey Turning Away from the West?” 26 September 2013. <http://www.voanews.com/content/is-turkey-turning-away-from-the-west/1757738.html>.



government. The next year, in 2012, the number of Libyans visiting Turkey skyrocketed to 213,890, increasing to 264,266 in 2013 (the last full year for which figures are available), adding up to an 838% increase over a decade.

The reasons for these huge increases are many. Logistically, Turkey is more easily accessible for many Middle Eastern tourists than Europe, and certainly cheaper. Arab tourists also naturally feel more affinity for Turkey than sites in Europe because of the cultural similarities. A tourism official from Kuwait explained Turkey's popularity among visitors from his country simply, saying "Turkey is a Muslim country."<sup>64</sup> Compared to tourist destinations in Europe, Arab visitors face far fewer challenges in Turkey, according to a Jordanian resident of Saudi Arabia: "we don't need to worry about halal food, the culture is close to our own. Veiled women don't face any issues in Turkey."<sup>65</sup> That sentiment was echoed by a group of Egyptian tourists on Istiklal Street, one of whom said "we feel comfortable here," to nods from the rest of the group.<sup>66</sup> Part of this familiarity may come from the huge popularity of Turkish soap operas among Arab viewers. This phenomenon, which has received considerably media and academic attention over the past several years, has generally been studied in the context of the impact it has had on changing gender relations in the Arab world. But there are indications it has had a significant impact on tourism as well. A Turkish tour operator whose agency targets the Arab world saw his business double in a year, and attributed the increase to the popularity of the soap opera *Noor* (*Gumus* in Turkey).<sup>67</sup> Of course religious sites are a major draw for Arab tourists; Topkapi Palace, with its extensive collection of sacred Islamic objects, surpassed Hagia Sophia

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<sup>64</sup> Anatolia News Agency, 23 April 2012, "Arab tourists' interest in Turkey increases, say tourism officials," <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/arab-tourists-interest-in-turkey-increases-say-tourism-officials.aspx?pageID=238&nID=19073&NewsCatID=379>.

<sup>65</sup> Constanze Letsch, "Arab spring fuels tourism boom for Turkey." *The Guardian*. 25 July 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/25/arab-spring-fuels-turkey-tourism>

<sup>66</sup> Personal Interview. Kemal Saad. 5 January 2014. (on Istiklal)

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Cheviron, "Arabs tour Istanbul in search of TV stars," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 14 August 2009. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=more-real-than-life-2009-08-14>.

as Turkey's most visited museum for the first time in 2013, a fairly clear indication of the increased volume of Arab tourists.<sup>68</sup> But increasingly, Arab tourists are also coming to visit the sites they see on Turkish soaps, especially the beautiful mansions that line the Bosphorus, where so many of the series take place. This connection has not gone unnoticed by the Ministry itself, which "directly link[s] the dramas with a rise in the number of tourists to Turkey from Arab countries."<sup>69</sup> This image of Turkey largely mirrors that of its advertising campaign: modern, tolerant, and Western, presenting an almost 'occidental' view to lure Middle Eastern visitors.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it also seems that the supportive role that Turkey played in many Arab Spring uprisings garnered it goodwill across the region. One Libyan visitor to Turkey in 2014 explained his family's decision to visit Turkey by saying "We wanted to visit [the] country that helped us."<sup>70</sup> This sentiment was echoed by other tourists from Libya, one of whom stated that he "loved" Turkey for the role it played in the Libyan uprising.<sup>71</sup> The Turkish government has also been extremely active in cultivating tourism ties with Arab states. At a tourism conference in 2012, Prime Minister Erdogan proclaimed his government's new approach as a return to Ottoman era Turkish-Arab ties: "as we have done for 600 years, we see Arab nations as our brothers, friends and neighbors.... therefore, our government has established a different type of communication and cooperation with our old friends and brothers over the last nine and a half years."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Topkapi Palace Museum beats Hagia Sophia in 2013," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 February 2014. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/topkapi-palace-museum-beats-hagia-sophia-in-2013-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=62270&NewsCatID=349>.

<sup>69</sup> Nathan Williams, "The rise of Turkish soap power," *BBC Magazine*, 27 June 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22282563>

<sup>70</sup> Personal Interview. Mustafa Zeytan and Family. 6 January 2014. (on Istklal)

<sup>71</sup> Persona Interview. Ahmar Mohammed. 5 January 2014. (at Pierre Loti Café).

<sup>72</sup> Anatolia News Agency. "Premier seeks out more Arab tourism." 23 April 2012. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/premier-seeks-out-more-arab-tourism.aspx?pageID=238&nID=19034&NewsCatID=349>

The results of this huge influx of Arab tourism are instantly apparent, especially to those who have not been to Turkey in several years. In Turkey's more touristic locales, foreign languages have long been part of the urban geography. English is, of course, particularly common, but French, German, and increasingly Russian can also be seen (each of these nations



Figure 1

also tends to gravitate toward a particular coastal city; Antalya's tourist population, for example, is predominantly Russian). But, over the past 5 years, a new language can increasingly be seen on Turkey's streets, from Istanbul to smaller provincial towns: Arabic. Five years ago, walking through Istanbul, even in the most touristic areas, one hardly, if ever, saw any advertisements in Arabic. Now, they can be seen nearly everywhere, even on Istiklal Avenue, Istanbul's main pedestrian thoroughfare. The Istiklal branch of Mado, Turkey's premier ice cream and desert brand, welcomes

visitors not in English, or even Turkish, but in Arabic (see Fig. 1). The recent explosion of Arabic language materials for visitors from the Middle East is not limited to Istanbul. In the sleepy seaside town of Yalova, about a 90-minute ferry ride from Istanbul on the Sea of

Marmara's southern coast, Arabic is practically a second language. Fadli Ozbay, a real estate agent in Yalova, described the arrival of Arab tourists to Yalova over the past two years as a



“flood.”<sup>73</sup> According to Ozbay, most Arab tourists buy properties in Yalova for its proximity to both Istanbul and the natural hot springs in the village of Termal (about a 20 minutes ride from Yalova); Ozbay estimated that most of the Arabs were from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>74</sup> The increased presence of Arab tourists in Yalova is evident everywhere. While English signs are few and far between, most stores welcome visitors in

Arabic and nearly every restaurant posts menus in Turkish and Arabic (see Fig. 2). While many residents of Yalova are alarmed by this new presence, many business owners are pleased to have a new, and heavy spending, customer base. One restaurant owner, while expressing unease at how her Arab guests generally seated the women and children of their group at a table separate from the men, welcomed the increase in business, saying “The Arabs here are always going out for dinner,” and attributing the recent brightening of the restaurant's financial outlook to the Arab-driven rise in business.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Personal Interview. Fadli Ozbay. 8 January 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Personal Interview. Fatma Gurses. 8 January 2014.

## **Conclusion**

Those who are skeptical that studying tourism can illuminate larger questions of national identity and international relations need look no further than the case of Turkey and Middle East.

Tourism is a critical industry for Turkey, and tourism represents a unique lens through which to examine the issues of Turkey's self-identity as well as its international relations. In the final analysis, in many ways, the image projected to the world is at odds with the direction Turkey is going. Turkey's self identity, as seen in tourism advertisements, is first and foremost as a modern, European nation. It is against this background of modernity that the unique facets of Turkish culture are presented, including its natural wonders and historic sites. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has also made a concerted effort to highlight Turkey's Christian history, at the expense of its Muslim identity. This presents a striking contrast with both the changing nature of the tourists coming to Turkey (who are increasingly non-Western) and the government's foreign policy trajectory. Middle Eastern interest in Turkey is exploding at a time when arrivals from traditional sources like Western Europe are staying level, if not declining. It remains to be seen how long Turkey can continue to be a top destination for both markets; but for the time being, Turkey seems to be able to accommodate both tourists seeking a sunny beach as well as those looking for a cultural experience, as well as visitors from both East and West.

But the limits of this balancing act are clear. We began with Erdogan's bombastic statements about 'not needing' Israeli tourists in 2012, but this was not the first time his rhetoric had a significant and measurable impact on Israeli tourism to Turkey. His angry confrontation with Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos in 2009 led to a dramatic decline in Israeli bookings in Turkey that summer: tour operators and hotel managers along Turkey's Mediterranean coast reported as many as 10,000 cancellations, a 70% decline in what was once

one of Turkey's biggest markets, and 40 flights to Turkey were cancelled as well.<sup>76</sup> As one tour operator put it, "we are paying the price for Erdogan's anger."<sup>77</sup> Tensions between the AKP's pragmatic members who focus on neoliberal economic development and those who are more ideologically inclined have been speculated about for years in the realm of domestic politics, particularly with regards to the purported rift between President Abdullah Gul and Erdogan, who are said to represent the respective wings. The tourism sector represents another, and perhaps more revealing, lens through which to examine these tensions; the Ministry is, in many respects, the only segment of Turkish government and society not yet subjected to a program of Islamization. It is no coincidence that one of the AKP deputies to resign from the party last year was Ertugrul Gunay, the former Minister of Culture and Tourism. As Turkey continues to reposition itself in relation to Europe and the Middle East in coming years, and the struggle between the two wings of the AKP intensifies, tourism will remain a uniquely valuable perspective in evaluating these shifts.

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<sup>76</sup> "Israel tourism bookings hit by Davos walkout," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 April 2009, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/finance/11343118.asp?scr=1>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

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