Turkey’s president builds mosque larger than those of sultans

by Alexander Christie Miller in the October 12, 2016 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) “This isn’t being built for the people who live here,” said Ethem Özdemir, as he considered the enormous concrete dome gradually rising beyond his home.

His neighborhood lies on Istanbul’s Çamlıca Hill, a spot so favored that the Ottoman sultans who once ruled the city built pavilions there to enjoy the breathtaking view it commands of the Bosphorus strait.

Now Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is crowning Çamlıca with a mosque larger than anything built by the sultans: it will have a capacity for 37,500 people and is costing some $45 million.

“This is a place that can be seen from everywhere,” said Özdemir, a 35-year-old IT specialist. “That’s why they’re building the mosque here. They want to create something to put their signature on Istanbul, like the Eiffel Tower or the Statue of Liberty.”

For several years now President Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been undertaking a massive construction program worth some $200 billion—more than a quarter of Turkey’s annual GDP—with about half invested in Istanbul alone.

With the country facing a series of crises, including terrorist bombings, a civil war in the Kurdish southeast, and a failed putsch that has triggered an authoritarian crackdown, with plummeting tourism revenues as a consequence, Erdogan’s megaprojects are crucial in his effort to project an image of Turkish success to his people and the world.

“Particularly after the coup attempt, the megaprojects have become a symbol of national resilience,” said Mustafa Akyol, author of *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*. “They seem to say that everyone is attacking us but we are resisting and still growing. . . . They stand as icons of national self-confidence.”

The designs under construction include a $24 billion airport for Istanbul, slated to be the world's largest, and a $7.5 billion, 270-mile highway linking Istanbul to Turkey's third-largest city, Izmir. The grandest of all is still on the drawing board: a canal that will link the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara, aimed at easing shipping traffic through the Bosphorus, which forms part of the boundary between Europe and Asia.

The political value of such projects for Erdogan was evident in late August at the opening of the $3 billion Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, the third suspension bridge to span the Bosphorus.

At the ceremony Erdogan quoted a Turkish saying: "When a donkey dies it leaves behind its saddle, when a man dies he leaves behind his works. We will be remembered for this."

Erdogan described the bridge as a reflection of the spirit of those who took to the streets to resist July's coup attempt, in which 246 civilians were killed backing the government. "You are a people who stood in front of tanks, guns, helicopters, and F-16s," he told the crowd of thousands. "This work befits you."

Özdemir is among a broad section of the public that approves of these mega-projects. "These are helping to connect the city, they're improving transport," he said. "There's an environmental cost, but they are necessary for our future."

What they mean for the future of Turkey's public finances is less certain, however. The government has justified the scope of its building program on the grounds that it is financed by the private sector, but it has been forced to guarantee infrastructure-related projects with public money due to the difficulty of attracting funding.

A mixture of environmental, corruption, and feasibility concerns have driven international investors away from some of the most ambitious projects, such as the airport, and Turkey's own private sector has struggled to raise the necessary capital.

"There are a lot of question marks about these schemes," said Atilla Yesilada, an Istanbul-based analyst for Global Source Partners. "They are essentially Mr. Erdogan's ego projects."

Since comprehensive economic reforms were instituted under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund following an economic crisis in 2001, keeping a handle

on public debt has been a cornerstone of Turkey's economic stability.

While Mustafa Sönmez, an economist, doubts the megaprojects could trigger a repeat of that crisis, he believes the real cost is likely to be environmental. For example, in Istanbul the construction of Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge and the new airport are set to destroy forests to the north of the city that help supply its water and clean its air.

"These projects are very costly for Istanbul," Sönmez said, adding that Istanbul's high real estate values and international prominence increase the political and economic value of construction. "Erdogan uses Istanbul like petroleum or liquid gas—its position, its land. He uses these specialities of Istanbul as a power source."

That's nowhere more evident than at the Çamlıca Mosque, and few projects are as laden with political symbolism. During the days of the Ottoman Empire, the greatest sultans were accustomed to stamping their legacy on the city with impressive mosque complexes.

When Sultan Ahmed I built the Blue Mosque in 1609, he was accused of hubris for adorning it with six minarets. The city's largest mosque, the Süleymaniye of Süleyman the Magnificent—widely seen as the greatest of the sultans—has only four minarets.

Like Ahmed's, Erdogan's mosque has six minarets; it dwarfs even Süleyman's and is built in the classic Ottoman style. Many Turks suspect that, like the sultans before him, he intends the complex to one day house his own tomb.

Korhan Gümüs, an architect, said the project exemplifies the efforts by competing factions within Turkish society to define the nation through public architecture—a tendency that predates the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

While Turkey's secularist republican leaders followed a modernist style, often using European architects, the country's religious conservatives have championed a neo-Ottoman style, as exemplified at Çamlıca.

"We can interpret many of these projects as an attempt to define the nation state through public space," he said.

The problem with this approach, Gümüsş argues, is that it tends to exclude and alienate elements of the population who don't share the governing party's values.

The Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, for example, angered the country's Alevi minority, adherents to a mystical branch of Islam who make up 15 percent of the population. It is named after Sultan Selim the Grim, who earned his sobriquet due to his bloody persecution of the Alevi.

More divisive still is the government's project to redesign the city's central Taksim Square, which has long been a place associated with the country's leftist movement, by building a mosque there and rebuilding an Ottoman-era barracks in place of Taksim's Gezi Park. That plan triggered massive nationwide protests in the summer of 2013.

"The Turkish state is in a fragile situation, and these projects reflect this problem," Gümüşş said. "If you define public space in an exclusive way, you put stress on civil society. Public space should integrate the diversity of society, not seek to mask it."

Yesilada makes a similar argument, but from an economic perspective. He believes that the money invested in Turkey's megaprojects would be better spent investing in education and skills to develop a high-tech economy.

"Building a mosque on top of Çamlıca that can be seen for 20 miles means everyone will remember the building, but not the people who built it, and that's sad," he said. "We need to invest in humans, not buildings."

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