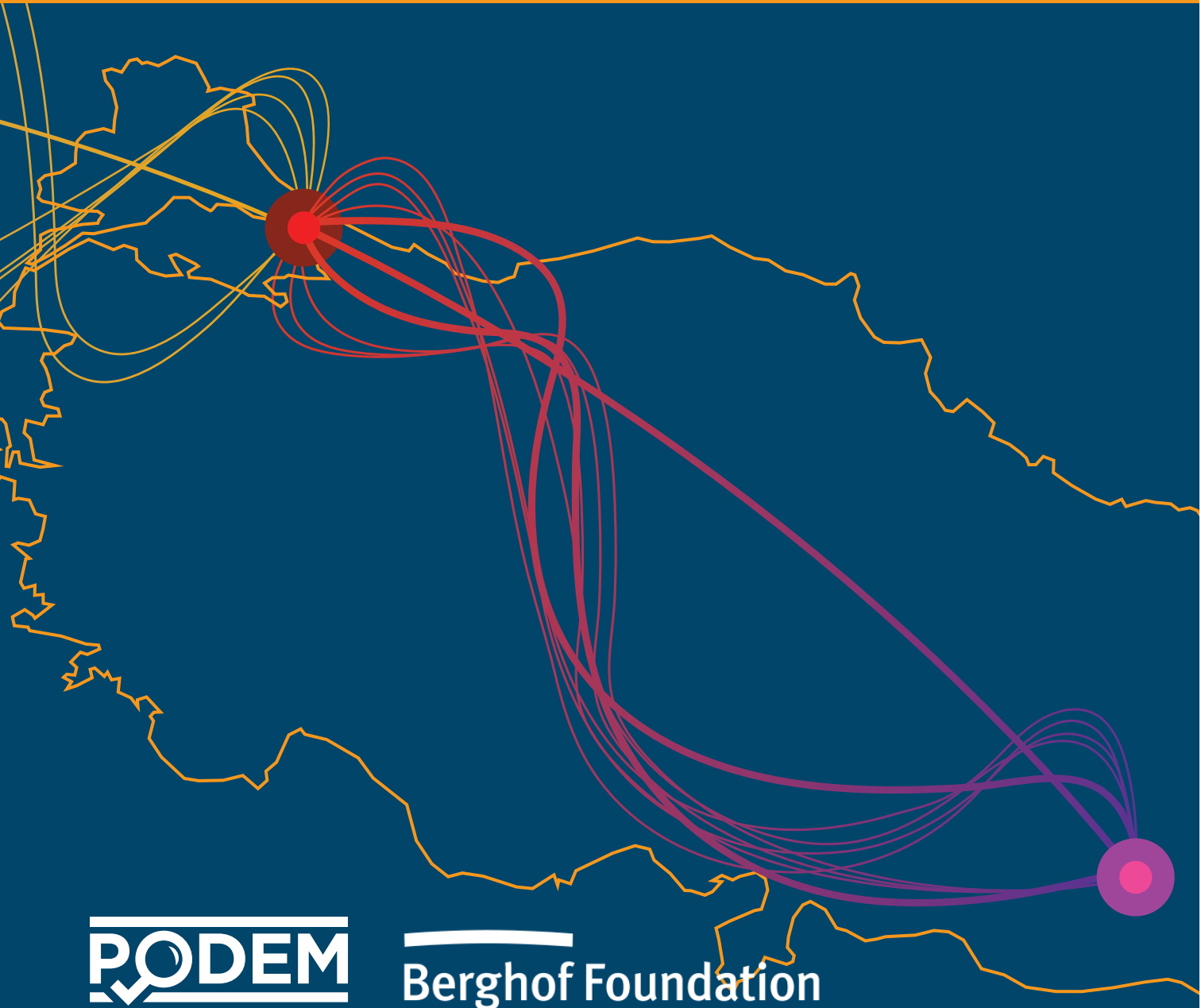


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# The Modes Of Politicization Of Youth In Turkey: A Cross-communal Evaluation

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## THE MODES OF POLITICIZATION OF YOUTH IN TURKEY: A CROSS-COMMUNAL EVALUATION

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## **About PODEM**

Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi Çalışmaları Derneği, PODEM) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.

At PODEM, our vision is to contribute to the building of an environment in Turkey where the institutional and legal foundations for democracy are established, a democratic mind-set, social peace and justice are embedded, and one that yields greater credibility to Turkey to facilitate regional and global peace and justice. Our mission is to understand and analyse through research the changing dynamics of Turkey's society, its relations with other societies and states and to translate our insights into policy suggestions.

## **About Berghof Foundation**

This study is published in the context of a joint project of PODEM and the Berghof Foundation, an independent, non-governmental and non-profit organisation that supports sustainable peace through conflict transformation. With the mission of "creating space for conflict transformation", the Berghof Foundation works with like-minded partners in selected regions to enable conflict stakeholders and actors to develop non-violent responses in the face of conflict-related challenges.

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## Foreword

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This report aims to understand the modes of politicization among young people from different identity groups in Turkey. To this end, it presents comparative analyses of four pieces of qualitative field research in Istanbul and two in Diyarbakır, in dimensions of ideology, identity, class, individualization, and action/violence. The report seeks to highlight the similarities and differences between Alevi, Kurdish, Islamist youth in Istanbul and Kurdish youth in Diyarbakır in the above-mentioned dimensions.

The first piece of research in Istanbul was conducted with young people from low-income, Alevi-populated neighbourhoods, inhabited also by left-wing movements. On top of interviews with opinion leaders, one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with 38 people between ages 16-35, whose families had migrated from the Anatolian provinces of Erzincan, Sivas, Tokat, Kahramanmaraş and Tunceli to the neighbourhoods under the scope of the research. Semi-ethnographic data was also collected in Cemevis, tea gardens and coffee houses in the neighbourhoods.

The second research in Istanbul took place in the Küçükçekmece district where various ethnic identities, namely Kurds, Albanians and Bulgarians, are dominant. The research analyses the sense of identity among young people from these neighbourhoods through its socioeconomic, social and political dimensions. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 people between ages 17-28. Semi-ethnographic data was also collected in parks, coffee houses, craft stores and markets in the neighbourhoods.

The third research in Istanbul aims to explore the social relations, spatial factors, and socioeconomic conditions that shape the senses of belonging of Kurdish youth from Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods, where they live with their parents that moved from eastern and south-eastern provinces due to forced immigration and economic need. As a part of the research, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 Kurdish youths between ages 19-29.

The last piece of research in Istanbul was conducted around Islamist groups/circles in Istanbul. Instead of the focus on neighbourhoods, this time interviews were conducted among 30 people that are members of various Islamist organizations and their offshoots. The sample was formed to reflect the wide spectrum of Islamist thought.

The Diyarbakır research encompasses two fields— first, with young people close to Kurdish political life; second, with young people close to Islamist organizations active in the region.

In the first part of the Diyarbakır field, in-depth interviews were held with a total of 20 young people between ages 18 - 29 that are close to Kurdish politics. Interviewees were met with in houses, cafés, and associations. In the second part of the field, which focuses on youth close to Islamist organizations/movements in Diyarbakır, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 people between ages 20 – 32 that carry out civil society activities in Islamist circles.

The research in Istanbul was carried out throughout 2015, while the research in Diyarbakır was carried out in the summer of 2016.





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## Introduction

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Over the past fifteen years, Turkey has experienced a geographical development nearly tantamount to that of the late 19th century and an ensuing intellectual whirlwind that proceeded in lockstep with it. Among the major factors that have had an impact on this phenomenon is globalization, which has created a world with multiple players, increased uncertainty, and additionally, propelled the re-structuring of the Middle East to the fore-front. Meanwhile, the increasing xenophobia in Western nations—especially that targeting Muslim identity—has raised racial and ethnic tension in their communities. On the other hand, the prevailing Kurdish politics has expanded the borders of the ‘Kurdish issue’ beyond those of Turkey in hope of establishing an autonomous rule in Syria. This is how Turkey diverged from the frame of mind where it once felt secure within its national borders.

During the same period, the per capita income within Turkey notably rose and urbanization and infrastructure investments exceeded those undertaken throughout the entire history of the Republic. At a time when the legacy of the Kemalist regime was running out of steam, the AK Party established a government which carried the periphery to the centre, and subsequently led to the doubling of the middle class in the country in a relatively short time period.

It was during that same time frame when the bar in Turkey was raised in terms of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. It became more difficult for the closed congregational structures to sustain themselves; individualization and secularism started spreading at an increasing rate; the majority of society actively explored the subject of universal truths; and yet, a simultaneous perception of threat in terms of territorial integrity and national identity was on the rise.

While such a chaotic atmosphere was leading to the diversification and increasing politicization of identity-related demands, the ruling party kept vacillating between implementing democratic reforms and utilizing law enforcement-driven authoritative methods. However, each of these vacillations not only led to disappointments, but also made governing the country much more difficult. The delay in implementing solutions, coupled with the doubts on what direction the country was headed, encouraged the politicization of the youth, with certain groups among them turning to embrace radical approaches.

This research is based on four qualitative limited area field researches in Istanbul, as well as two in Diyarbakır. The field research in Istanbul is geared towards understanding the Kurdish, Alevi, and Islamist youth who stand close to radical ideas. As for the studies in Diyarbakır, they comprise

young people—of whom all are Kurds—who are affiliated with the prevailing Kurdish political movement or the local Islamist political entities. Therefore, the objective of this research is not merely to understand young people, or even the politicized youth, in Turkey. In a more specific sense, the subject matter of this study relates to **'young individuals who are in contact with/feel affinity to political entities and organizations that could resort to violence.'**

The following analysis attempts to establish the common aspects and differences in young individuals of different identities within Istanbul and Diyarbakır respectively by initially examining the two cities separately. As for the evaluation sections, they allow us to examine Istanbul and Diyarbakır as a whole, and conduct a regional comparison in terms of Kurdish and Islamic identities.

The above-mentioned analysis and comparisons are carried out according to five dimensions: ideology, identity, class, individualization, and action/violence.

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# Ideology

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## **Istanbul: common aspects**

Despite having different identities and ideologies, young individuals who are amenable to radical ideas share four common elements in terms of their respective perception:

1. All issues and solutions are defined on an ideological platform; their ideologies may surround their entire semantic world.
2. In the backdrop of the ideological attitude, young people feel negatively impacted and disappointed by fast-paced developments.
3. They are all afraid of being assimilated by the so-called 'enemy' environment that surrounds them.
4. On the other hand, they all think that the solution lies within the eradication of their own suffering and that it will have no impact on persons of other identities.

## **Istanbul: differences**

The most prevalent difference among young individuals of the three different identities reveals itself as what they trust or distrust. While the Kurds trust Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), they harbour distrust towards the state and government. The Alevis hold a feeling of trust towards the West even though such trust is not manifested strongly, and contrastingly harbour distrust towards the state and government. Islamists, on the contrary, have faith in the state and government, and do not trust the West, specifically Western values.

## **Diyarbakır: common aspects**

Two different youth groups, subscribing to Kurdish and Islamist ideologies respectively, have three views in common:

1. All issues and solutions are defined on an ideological platform; ideologies are almost the only single reference point for all answers and questions.
2. The ideological and political fight is sacred as far as both groups are concerned. The alienation experienced throughout this process is regarded as a positive element.
3. The reflection of values such as freedom and equality, implied by democratization in real life, is regarded as a necessity and yet not deemed sufficient for a solution.
4. An opportunistic approach in the name of political goals is seen as acceptable and rational.
5. Alternatives regarded as a 'solution' by some ideological groups are perceived as threats by other groups.

## Diyarbakır: differences

1. Even though civilian politics is supported as a matter of principle, those holding their Kurdish identity above everything else are more prone to leaving an open door to violence.
2. Those who embrace their Kurdish identity ideologically justify the legitimacy of the opportunistic approach by their stance against the state, while those who embrace the Islamist identity justify such an approach by standing against the global system.
3. 'Democracy' is a positive medium for Kurds and a usable tool. As for Islamists, it is a negative systemic method of enforcement and almost an independent factor.

## Evaluation

A look at young individuals within political groups reveals the fact that the fundamental axis that unifies Istanbul and Diyarbakır is ideological. Regardless of their groups or identities, young individuals perceive issues, as well as their solutions, through a fundamental ideology that surrounds, and gives meaning to, their entire lives. This ideology functions as a macro-rhetoric. However, where it relates to their daily lives and relations with society, Istanbul and Diyarbakır both emerge as completely different states of existence.

Young people in Istanbul live with a constant perception of threat. Not only are they entangled in a daily flow of uncertainty and changes which they cannot be sure of, but they are also surrounded by a world that they regard as 'the enemy' which essentially belongs to 'the others'. Therefore, the first and foremost concern of young people in Istanbul is protection and self-preservation. Due to this reason, their political assessments are closely linked to trust- or distrust-related concerns.

Young people in Diyarbakır, on the other hand, live in their own social environment which corresponds to their identity. This is why they propel rhetoric on macro issues and solutions to the forefront while leaving problems or dangers implied by their daily lives in the back. Concentrating on the fight, this approach causes young people to put forth arguments that are more 'theoretical' and 'political'.

These two critical differences between young people in Istanbul and Diyarbakır reveal the susceptibility of youth politicization to the surrounding conditions. In Istanbul, alienation from the environment is an adverse factor due to the fact that it directly constitutes a threat to daily life. In contrast, alienation in Diyarbakır is experienced more on the rhetorical and political levels, and perceived positively since it tightens and reinforces the comradeship.

On a parallel note, young individuals in Istanbul are of the opinion that a solution for their own problems would not constitute a threat to others, thereby implying that they would not be against a solution for the problems of others as well. However, those in Diyarbakır think otherwise; they regard solutions for others as a direct threat to themselves, and do not deny that their solutions, in fact, constitute a threat to others.

Examining the ideology parameter, one can claim that the identity-related environment has an apparent impact on the politicization of the youth. Young people are in a more distrustful, fragile,

and uneasy mind-set in heterogeneous settings, and thus, worry about carrying on through their day-to-day life. This tension creates a gap between ideological rhetoric and daily actions, where their ideology functions as an argument of faith that holds them together rather than a mere generator of political statements.

As for homogenous settings and identity, creating rhetoric that upholds ideology by pushing aside the requirements of daily life—and defines a meaning for oneself and their adversaries within this framework—may become natural. Young people are more self-confident in the way they speak in such an atmosphere and believe their efforts are dedicated to the long-term and macro goals.

The distinction between the Kurdish and Islamist youth in these two regions in terms of ideological attitude adequately reflects the differences highlighted above. However, as a result of the more superior field status of the young individuals in Diyarbakır who emphasize their Kurdish identity over the Islamists—due to the PKK/HDP (People’s Democratic Party) factor—the fact that Islamists prefer a relatively more ‘principle-driven’ rhetoric while those with a Kurdish identity embrace a more ‘political/opportunistic’ one is noteworthy.

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# Identity

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## Istanbul: common aspects

There are quite apparent similarities between the Kurdish, Alevi, and Islamist groups throughout the course of gaining an identity awareness and politicization of young people:

1. It becomes evident that migration to metropolises and the experiences during this process have a direct impact on identification. Financial woes may in fact render such identification much deeper.
2. Still, urbanity is regarded as a positive aspect and a world of freedom and opportunities.
3. However, the magnitude and the complexity of the city direct the young people to much smaller-scale problems that pertain to their living quarters.
4. All young people feel a need to define themselves in the face of 'the other'.
5. They all harbour a sense of victimization versus the powerful.
6. Young individuals of all three identities have feelings of alienation, distrust, and rejection.
7. Their basic fear is hybridization and degeneration, meaning the loss of their identity.
8. Due to this state of mind, it becomes evident that all young individuals share a desire for 'identification', regardless of their identity.
9. The combination of a drive for identification and a defensive instinct leads to the association of certain places with certain identities. Each group finds or creates 'micro' spaces that they identify with in the city.
10. Groups keep their distances from places of other identities, as much as they do other identities, and avoid physical encounters.

## Istanbul: differences

The only meaningful difference in terms of identity between the different sets of young individuals seems to be the native language of young Kurds, and faith for Alevi and Islamists, as a conduit for their respective identities.

## Diyarbakır: common aspects

Despite the fact that young individuals subscribe to different ideological views, those who emphasize their Kurdish or Islamist identities share significant similarities:

1. All young people share a perception of discrimination and injustice, and lay this in the very foundation of their respective views.

2. Not only do they not have any ties to Turkey's west, with the exception of Istanbul, but they also have no desire to associate with it on any level.
3. They do not have a sense of belonging towards Turkey. The prevailing lifestyle and administrative approach throughout Turkey is largely met with feelings of resentment, rejection, and humiliation among these young individuals.
4. Therefore, their sense of belonging is geared towards integrity within their collective vision. A 'macro space' is created, complete with its abstract aspects, to provide an outlet for the search for a sense of belonging. Young people who emphasize their Kurdish identities turn to Kurdish lands—within Turkey or the Middle East—for this sense of belonging. As for those with an Islamist identity, this sense of belonging lies in Islamic lands, or the ummah, in a broader and vaguer definition.

### **Diyarbakır: differences**

Two basic differences are noteworthy among the young Kurds and Islamists:

1. As for those who express themselves through their Kurdish identity, there is no difference in the perception of how they are viewed within and outside the Kurdish lands; they are seen as 'Kurds' everywhere. Nevertheless, young people who define themselves as Islamists within the region are regarded as 'Kurds' by others when they leave this region. This makes the state of mind of the Islamist young people much more complex and could potentially lead to a multi-faceted interpretation and political searches.
2. Both groups of young people—those manifesting their Kurdish and Islamist identities—feature a spectrum of views ranging from 'soft' to 'hard' within their groups. Hard views are directly related to affinity with the PKK for those emphasizing their Kurdish identities. As for Islamists, there exists a more horizontal and plural social structuring, and hardness may vary depending on what congregation they belong to.

## **Evaluation**

When viewed in terms of forming an identity, by far, all young people, regardless of identity, share a common feeling of discrimination, injustice, and rejection. The victimization rhetoric generally has a legitimizing function, and renders identification as commonplace in everyone's eyes. Based on this, it is plausible to assert that identity primarily contains a reactive aspect among young people, and is thus, regarded as a means of existence, protection, and proving one's self.

However, a very fundamental rift is also observed between Istanbul and Diyarbakır. Young persons in Istanbul are of the opinion that they are engaged in a mandatory existential struggle, and are trying to develop the necessary tactics to live with others. It is therefore possible to assert that they are in an ongoing process of learning. In contrast, it can be observed that young people in Diyarbakır consider the region as a sufficient totality. They are not interested in what is outside the region, and even reject other identity-related and political stances. This legitimizes the focus of their energy within the region and toward each other in their own opinion.



The fear of losing one's identity, which is prevalent in Istanbul, is non-existent in Diyarbakır. The preservation instinct in Istanbul gives way to a search of making a mark in life through one's identity in Diyarbakır. The substance of the 'struggle' engaged in as an extension of such differing drives varies as well. Young people in Istanbul are more prone to defining the struggle on a more 'micro' scale, by limiting it to their own habitat. Contrarily, those in Diyarbakır expand the geographical area as well as identity-related connections as much as possible and choose to fit the concept of their struggle in a broad, 'macro' framework.

As a consequence, the 'threat of identity erosion' in Istanbul is not visible in Diyarbakır. As opposed to the urge to preserve identities in Istanbul, there is a search for the identity to make a full-on impact upon life in Diyarbakır. The struggles given as a response to these two different urges are likewise different. In Istanbul, youth are more prone to sustain the struggle in a 'micro' scale, within the confines of their own lives. As for Diyarbakır, an opposite reflex is observed: extravert behaviour, broadening, and escalating to higher levels of rhetoric comprise the common thread for young people. Daily political bottlenecks are addressed by widening the scope of view from which the issue is perceived, and the solution is sought, again, from that same perspective.

If we were to compare those who emphasize the Kurdish or Islamist identities on a geographical basis, it would be possible to say that those in Istanbul highlight a more social one. For Kurds, this would be native language; and for Islamists, Islam. Yet, both groups in Diyarbakır place 'politics' in the centre, and reinforce their identity through fulfilling the requirements of active politics. Thus, while cultural aspects of identity feature a constructive power, politics forms and shapes the prevailing opinion and language in the region.

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# Class

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## **Istanbul: common aspects**

It is possible to observe the fact that young people of different identities share similarities in terms of socioeconomic status and adapting to the conditions of their surroundings. Class standing emerges as a suitable definition to recapitulate this diversity, because a fundamental component within the perception of young people refers to the existence of a hierarchy that they are unable to overcome.

- 1.** One could assert the fact that there is a direct correlation between socioeconomic status, class, and embracing an identity. Young people from families of a lower socioeconomic level—who interpret their status from a class perspective—are more susceptible to quickly embracing an identity.
- 2.** The urbanization process is a dominant factor in the family's perception of its surroundings and life. Discrimination that occurs throughout this process tends to leave rather critical and long-lasting marks which may in fact lead to the family's alienation or isolation from society.
- 3.** As for the lower social classes, embracing an identity transpires on a more emotional and reactionary level, and thus, may be more prone to featuring radical characteristics.
- 4.** Nonetheless, a desire to get closer to the centre, utilize the city, and achieve a higher social status is very high among young people. However, apprehension and fears on remaining an outsider may play a preventative role to this desire.
- 5.** It is not easy for young people to establish individual relationships with other identities in places where congregations of different identities live in close proximity to each other. Everyone finds themselves in a position to fall in line with the state of mind and pressures of their own neighbourhood. In contrast, it becomes evident that individual relationships can be established more easily if other congregations of different identities are geographically distant.
- 6.** Education seems to be the most important leverage in terms of overcoming the outsider status and becoming a part of the centre. Overcoming the shrunken identity-related spaces may make young people feel freer and secure enough to become more engaged in the centre.

## **Istanbul: differences**

Despite the fact that socioeconomic and class status, and politicization and becoming amenable to radical views are generally inversely proportional, the existence of a different

tendency with the Alevis is noteworthy. Though such data does not lend itself well to generalization, in Alevi families who are of relatively higher social status, faith is considered outside of Islam, and Alevism may then be defined as a more political approach. As for lower income groups and life in the neighbourhood, Alevism is accepted to be within Islam and thus emerges with its cultural aspect. Therefore, politicization is most probably experienced through 'leftism' more than anything. If we were to take the tendency of high social status as an indicator of integration, one could claim that its presence shows an inversely proportional correlation between integration and politicization of identity among Kurdish and Islamic identities, and a directly proportional correlation among Alevis.

### **Diyarbakır: common aspects**

While assessing the relationship between identity and socioeconomic status, the complex state of identification for young Islamists within the region becomes quite evident. This is due to socioeconomic issues being associated with the Kurdish identity, and this holds true for Islamists as well. Therefore, while the Islamist youth assume their identities through Islam, they are in a position where they have to equally embrace the Kurdish identity as a result of the problems they face. This points to the fact that a more uniform Kurdish identity functions against the rest of society and the country.

### **Diyarbakır: differences**

Even though the notion of socioeconomic issues being associated with Kurdish identity is accepted by all those concerned, the way this is perceived by the Kurdish or Islamist identity is not entirely the same. For those who politicize the Kurdish identity, all issues are ideological, regardless of scale. Whereas for Islamists, what matters is the quality, quantity, and depth of a given socioeconomic problem. An issue is considered to be ideological only when it becomes 'incendiary'. It can thus be asserted that Islamists keep themselves at arm's length from the Kurdish identity. Furthermore, while everything is a part of the 'Kurdish issue' for those who emphasize their Kurdish identity, this is not the case for Islamists. Therefore, for the former group the solution becomes crystal clear in the realm of Kurdish political demands. For the latter, however, the solution applies on a macro and global scale, and is rather defined on an ideological dimension.

## **Evaluation**

When considered alongside employment and education opportunities, it is possible to assert that socioeconomic mediums and opportunities have a great impact on the relationship young individuals establish with life. It can also be observed that generally better living conditions create a rather 'soft' identity assumption. However, it can be said that the socioeconomic dimension and class standing in general is a much more prevalent determining factor in Istanbul in terms of identity assumption and politicization. As for Diyarbakır, politicization is more determined by the ideological setting rather than the standard of the actual living conditions.

Accordingly, the context of the class-driven viewpoints differs in these two geographical locations. Young people in Istanbul (also) have a perspective that aims at moving up to a higher social class, and improving living conditions. Yet, in Diyarbakır, the emphasis is on pre-existing issues that have persisted across the years, rather than an aspiration to 'move up'.

Such a perspective may lead to a claim where young people in Istanbul may be in a position to dream of a more hopeful future despite the fact that they live in a more 'foreign' and 'tougher' setting. And the young people in Diyarbakır, despite the fact that they own the setting they live in, have a more pessimistic outlook. This is also influenced by the fact that the 'solution' is more individual in Istanbul, whereas it is more social in nature in Diyarbakır.

The socioeconomic setting in Istanbul is rather regarded as something that young people just 'fall into'. Therefore no one claims that this, in itself, is ideological at all. However, the reaction and treatment they receive lends itself to being interpreted as ideological by the young people. On the other hand, almost every determining factor for life in Diyarbakır is ideological from the outset.

The fundamental difference between Istanbul and Diyarbakır, from a youth perspective, is that in one, they live in someone else's world, while in the other, they live in their own world. A need and desire to forge one's own space in a truly heterogeneous setting made up of multiple identities in Istanbul is obviously dominant; whereas Diyarbakır happens to be a city that primarily and singularly reflects the Kurdish identity. Therefore, politicization there happens within a more identity-based and regional perspective, and does not encourage individual pursuits.

The fact that congregational and communal approaches in Diyarbakır are determining factors for both Kurdish and Islamist youth groups, is a natural outcome of the above-mentioned perceptions. Individual pursuits are perceived as straying from politics and identity at the same time. As for Istanbul, individualistic behaviour is possible, and not frowned upon. Even though it may 'stretch' to the extent where it is exercised by getting closer to the centre, and increasing in numbers, it does not lead to straying away from the identity and political views, because the foreign setting continues to exist.

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# Individualization

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## Istanbul: common aspects

The individualization of young people throughout the course of assuming an identity and politicization has a critical function from both an intellectual and practical standpoint. It is possible for individualization to draw someone closer to violent politics, or keep them away from it, but its positive influence becomes much more evident in the metropolis.

- 1.** Regardless of their identity, all families are patriarchal in nature, excessively protective of their children, and bothered by their children stepping outside certain norms. Among the influencing factors on this are having migrated to a foreign place, self-preservation instinct, and fear of the family breaking apart. And yet, incompatibilities arise between the norms of the big city and those of the families, leaving the young people perplexed and suspended in the middle. It is entirely possible for such a conflict to drive some young individuals to adopt a political stance that is 'well beyond' the family and its political views.
- 2.** Pressure on women is much more intense as a common characteristic of patriarchal families. Therefore, women may turn to politics in search of a legitimate reaction to the family, and as a result, may move on to a relatively freer setting. In this context, certain hints suggesting that politics is influential in redefining gender relations and may eventually alter the hierarchy within the family can be observed.
- 3.** It becomes evident that young people share a widespread drive to break off or escape from the family. Young people have a tendency to pursue their own lives and futures 'outside', even if this may not be how the case unfolds in reality. The desire to live one's own life as they see fit is common. Consequently, young people then find themselves in a position to face a broad spectrum in terms of identity and politics, and thus develop their individual stance in this process.
- 4.** Having an advantageous position in terms of education and income usually reinforces individualization. Conversely, chasing education and income opportunities in the pursuit of individualization can also contribute positively to young individuals. Succeeding to reach the centre has a positive role on individualization, because the diversity of the centre allows young people of all identities and views to 'co-exist'.
- 5.** It becomes quite obvious that social media is among the most influential areas in individualization. There, young people are able to get away from the pressures and expectations of their setting, and hold on to 'worlds' of their own choice. However, the extent of how liberating social media can be is doubtful, because young people may in fact be using it to create narrow groups and polarization as well.

## **Istanbul: differences**

A comparison of identities reveals two noteworthy points:

- 1.** The politicization of women is much more common among Kurdish and Alevi families. One can see more of these examples especially in families living on the outskirts of the city, and in cases where conservatism within the family is prevalent. Conversely, one could claim that resistance to change or family ties is more rigid in Islamist families.
- 2.** Cases where young Kurds and Alevis turn to politics and form groups are rare and the families are privy to those. In contrast, young Islamists find a veritable range of political and organizational options before them. So one could claim that it is much more difficult for young Islamists to make their initial break away from the family. Nevertheless, there are also cases where young Islamists who are already involved in a certain congregation breaking off to pursue politics on an individual level. As congregational structures become more flexible, being in contact with multiple congregations, and choosing an increasingly individualistic attitude, may emerge.

## **Diyarbakır: common aspects**

In terms of identity, it can be said that living in a region of 'their own' may have positive influences on individualization.

- 1.** The fact that a desire for individualization is quite strong with young people may be readily observed. Learning a language and travelling are wishes that rise to the top. It could be argued that living in a relatively homogenous setting could soften the family pressure. Therefore, it becomes evident that there is a strong desire for a hopeful outlook and to be able to make plans for the future.
- 2.** Young people who seem to have become more individualized are observed to keep their distance from violence regardless of their political identity.
- 3.** The issue of women is generally regarded as secondary, and the notion that it must not be prioritized over the 'main' issue is emphasized.

## **Diyarbakır: differences**

There is a clear-cut difference among young individuals who are politicized—in their respective Kurdish and Islamist identities—in the way they choose their friends. Those who emphasize their Kurdish identities care for mutual views on politics and ideology, and the weight of these criteria becomes more evident in young individuals who are closer to the centre of PKK. For young individuals who have politicized their Islamist identity on the other hand, the determining factor in choosing friends is one's setting and congregation.

## **Evaluation**

The family structure where young individuals stem from seems to play a critical role in their individualization. There is really no meaningful difference between regions in this context; families in Istanbul usually live on the outskirts of the city after they have migrated there. Still, one can say that families in Istanbul are more protective, which in turn, exacerbates the pressure felt by young people. Families in Diyarbakır, however—who are not any less conservative from a traditional standpoint—may tend to have a softer approach towards younger people to the extent that they do not feel alienated in daily life. Additionally, it can be seen that Islamist families in both regions generally have a stricter family structure.

In any case, the majority of the young people feel strongly about gaining their independence from their families, living their own lives, and deciding on their own future. That being said, a look through the identity perspective reveals distinct differences, as well. Young Kurds and Alevis experience politicization and individualization as a part of the same process when they break off from their families; such that, individualization is almost perceived as a consequence of politicization for some young people. In contrast, while young Islamists may enter a congregation without having to leave their families, they also join a congregation as soon as they leave the family. Therefore, their first step is usually politicization. Subsequently, the process of establishing a distance with the congregation and building multiple congregational relationships individualizes them.

The factor which leads to such varying dynamics is the makeup of Kurdish, Alevi, and Islamist political/social structures. To the extent that the Kurdish political arena is dominated by a single organization (PKK), Kurdish young people are faced with a vertical and hierarchical organizational structure. While this situation happens to be more flexible on the social level for Alevis, they too, face a choice of whether or not they should be a part of a single hierarchical organizational structure on a political level. As for the Islamists' political level, it is made up of a horizontal and a multi-component structure. Therefore, young Islamists are more likely to make a choice, and pick a path to ideological hybridizations on their own.

It could be argued that individualization has a liberating function for young people of all identities. However, the differences between regions are apparent, too. Despite the fact that the conditions for individualization in Diyarbakır may seem to be weaker, the positive consequences of individualization are clearer. While the conditions in Istanbul are more conducive to individualization, the certainty of whether or not their consequences will be positive is vague. The reason behind this is the fact that individualization in Diyarbakır eventually means keeping a distance from hard politics, as well. But in Istanbul, similar results may not necessarily materialize. While the individualized young person chooses their own individual politics, this may just as well mean shifting over to a harder attitude.

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## Action/Violence

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### **Istanbul: common aspects**

It becomes evident that action itself, through the eyes of young people, carries a positive connotation. Young people, regardless of identity, are in search of action; they assume their identities through action, and believe they acquire their personality during this process. Therefore, action is a means of individualization and liberation for them. It is a conduit that brings the characteristics and differences of the person to the forefront and one that makes them respectable. Avoiding action, on the other hand, is generally perceived as a weak attitude that lacks character.

However, the liberating characteristic of action does not necessarily mean that young people are embracing free thinking. Indeed, it can be said that an authoritative mind-set dominates the minds of young people regardless of their identity. The idea where 'we' should be acting exclusionary, in response to the exclusionary attitude of others, enjoys natural acceptance. It is quite obvious that this is influenced by having to share habitats with other identities, and perceiving each and every one of them as threats.

### **Istanbul: differences**

There is a distinct difference between identities in terms of the function of violence and the meanings attributed to it. For young Kurds, violence is an emotional catharsis. It is an existential reaction in the face of the victimization that is present and believed to be continuing. For Alevis, violence is an extension of a conscientious responsibility. It is an obligation that has a function to prove the innocence of their identity. As for Islamists, violence is a means of teaching a lesson to the unfair and the oppressor. In other words, violence seems to take on a rather psychological function and meaning for the young Kurds, ideological for Alevis, and political for Islamists.

### **Diyarbakır: common aspects**

There are similarities between Kurdish and Islamist young people in their views of violence.

1. There is a 'grey area' surrounding young people between organizational structures resorting to violence, and political parties that are extensions of such organizations. A vast majority of young people end up in that grey area as a consequence of natural socializing processes. At this point, it seems almost impossible to predict which direction any young person will choose, or whether or not they will be able to leave this grey area.



2. Young people oppose violence as a matter of principle, and yet, they do not stand too far away from its pragmatic validation. Such validation is closely related to what political affiliation the young people belong to, and their position pertaining to that political affiliation. However, as a matter of general observation, it is possible to say that young individuals who assume a Kurdish identity politically stand closer to a sort of pragmatism that functionalizes violence.

3. As the issue turns broadens and starts concerning a wider geographic area for young people of both identities, it becomes much easier to accept violence. Therefore, the validity of violence in Syria finds acceptance with young people of both identities. Similarly, it becomes evident that the normalization of violence in one's mind becomes easier to the extent that the issue is given an ideological foundation.

### Diyarbakır: differences

There is a distinct difference of opinion between young people of Kurdish and Islamist identities when discussing the validity of violence in Turkey. Young Islamists underline the fact that civilian politics should be paramount in Turkey, and that violence should be an absolute last resort. However, young people emphasizing their Kurdish identity argue that violence should be kept 'on the side' in Turkey as well, and that it could legitimized during the course of the struggle.

## Evaluation

It is quite possible to make an observation where a state of action is natural and desired for young people in both locations. Young individuals exhibit a drive to take part in demonstrations, contribute in some way, and share—in line with their identities and political views—in any way they can. However, the action/violence duality takes on a different meaning between the two regions. For young individuals in Istanbul, the action itself is meaningful. Almost all of them agree on the fact that violence should be avoided if possible and tend to keep violence out of their discourse as a matter of principle. In contrast, in Diyarbakır, the word 'action' is insufficient to describe the existing rhetoric. Young individuals prefer to directly raise the element of violence in their speech, and discuss situations where they can be pro-violence.

Among the main factors underlying this difference is the dissimilarity between the ways -violence is experienced in these two regions. Taking all things into consideration, daily life surrounding these young people is coloured by different functions of action and violence. Taking part in action in Istanbul is largely a matter of personal decision that takes place on an individual level or within small groups. It is for this reason that the young people in Istanbul get to pick and choose from a wider behavioural range, and care about the fact that, this, in itself, is their 'own' choice. As for Diyarbakır, taking part in action is an outcome of group dynamics, and a requirement of an ongoing political struggle. For this reason, the element of violence gets centre stage, namely because the 'hardness' of the political face-off may render violence as commonplace.

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## General Evaluation

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Interviews held with young Kurds, Alevis, and Islamists—who are close to politics and organizations that may resort to violence—may be evaluated on two fundamental bases. While one can examine the similarities and the differences between such identities based on the available data, comparisons could also be made between the Istanbul and Diyarbakır settings where the study was conducted. So far, the similarities much outweigh the differences. And as for the origin of such similarities, it is none other than the very qualities of the environment and the setting where these young people live. In fact, one could argue that young people of different identities living in Istanbul or Diyarbakır go through largely similar politicization processes. In contrast, one could readily observe a clear and deep rift in terms of political and social settings between these two cities.

While the regional difference is more of a determining factor than an identity-related and ideological difference, there is a critical issue that separates young Islamists from the Kurdish and Alevi youth: while politicization corresponds to a self-professed individualization process for young Kurds and Alevis, ideological hybridization remains low. As for the Islamist youth, while politicization does not imply individualization on the outset, in a contrary fashion, pursuits within politics produce individualization, and may eventually pave the path to ideological hybridization.

A comparison between Istanbul and Diyarbakır highlights the similarities and differences covering all these three identities.

### Similarities

In both regions:

1. Ideology functions as a higher language that unites young individuals of the same identity under a single viewpoint, and establishes social/psychological ties.
2. All young individuals approach their surroundings with emotional reactions and affirm the victimization rhetoric.
3. They are all raised in largely patriarchal families that share conservative features in terms of these young individuals' freedom.
4. All young people share a desire to break away from, and 'surpass', the family. They want to become independent, plan their own lives, and develop their own skills.
5. Being in action is a valuable experience for all, and is a platform for self-actualization.

## Differences

It is quite obvious that there is a deep difference between the two cities that surround and influence all young individuals. Young people live in micro worlds that are segregated in terms of perception and evaluation of life, future, and politics.

### ***Istanbul:***

Young individuals have a perception of threat to the extent that they live in a heterogeneous setting with diversity. They feel a need to prove themselves, which stems from the feeling that their identities are constantly being tested. Therefore, their sense of trust is low. In contrast, they have a strong drive for self-preservation, introversion, and survival. For this reason, they feel a need to reinforce their identities and take shelter in the cultural references that their identities are based on.

Life presents itself as a fragmented reality to them and uncertainties of daily life gain importance. The pressure on young people increases in families with socioeconomic problems; as micro problems are propelled to the forefront, the struggle and activism turns to these narrow problematic areas. The gap between ideological rhetoric and real life pushes the requirements of ideology to the backdrop, and renders them into an all-encompassing area of 'faith'.

Politicization, thus, evolves into a more personal process. As for solutions that take the form of broadening the individual's views and pursuits, they only become meaningful within the individual's own framework. Achieving a higher status, becoming a part of the centre, and becoming more effective are all desires of young people. And taking part in these activities not only reflects individual perception and choice, but also holds meaning and value within small groups. However, despite the fact that the conditions for individualization are available, a multitude of vastly different personal paths may emerge in terms of proclivity for violence.

### ***Diyarbakır:***

Sharing a setting that reflects identity-related and cultural homogeneity, young people have a high sense of self-confidence. Having similar concerns and views highlights a common attitude as a group or congregation. In such an atmosphere that is defined by the ideological setting—where socioeconomic conditions remain secondary—ideological rhetoric and necessities of life become one, conditions are ideologically perceived, and ideology evolves into a platform of action.

Young people have a holistic sense of reality. Political uncertainty concerning the final standing of identity after identity-related struggles renders large issues and macro problems important, and redefines the struggle through a macro framework. The issues in general, and on a large scale, are perceived through the viewpoint of the Kurdish or Islamist geographies. Therefore, political references rule the language, and social solutions are targeted.

Even though the conditions for individualization are generally weak, it becomes evident that the outcome is positive for those who achieve it. Action takes place as a natural outcome of political stance, and transition to violence, again, takes place within natural dynamics. Violence goes hand-in-hand with a feeling of obligation, as an outcome of group dynamics, and gains meaning and value as a requirement of the cause of the fight.

## A Final Word...

It is worthwhile to emphasize that democratization is an inevitable necessity for Turkey in a world where political and ideological tendencies, and demands for identity related rights are justified and cannot be denied. However, a look through the eyes of young people reveals that such steps of reform may not be sufficient and that it may be necessary to take other steps that would ensure increase diversification and freedom in the public domain.

In this context, five points could be highlighted:

First, the influence of the global environment, the multitude of settings that integrate with it, and the social media on young people, will all continually increase over time.

Second, young people will be more prone to defining themselves through global and regional issues, and to assign themselves functions through such perspectives.

Third, the adverse influence of the regional differences in Turkey, in terms of ideological settings, will increase in the near future.

Fourth, guiding the young people in a positive and sound manner within these chaotic dynamics will only be possible by feeding their demands of freedom, individualization, and developing their character.

And finally, it will be necessary to create a public domain where young individuals can be involved in politics, or where they can feel that they can contribute in any way. In this context, it will also be necessary to diversify the means to this end, and to make them freely available, keeping in mind that such individualization may not necessarily mean straying away from politics.





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