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To Whom Does a Living Heritage Belong? Negotiations Over the Preservation of the Ottoman Legacy in Istanbul

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Abstract: The preservation of Ottoman heritage has been a contested topic in Turkey over the last few decades. While many studies have attended to the political and economic interests related to the restoration of Ottoman-era architectural complexes and buildings, this article draws attention to the intersecting aspirations and negotiations over the question of preservation by various actors in the historical Fatih district of Istanbul. The district's historical importance is traced back to 1463, when the Ottoman ruler Mehmet II (ca. 1432–1481) decided to build a monumental mosque complex after the city's conquest. The construction of additional monumental mosque complexes, *madrasa*s (colleges), Sufi lodges, and shrines in the later Ottoman period transformed the district into a space reflecting the enduring political and socio-religious presence of Islamic and Ottoman urban traditions. Starting from the latter half of the nineteenth century, Ottoman modernization and early twentieth century Republican secularization significantly transformed the district's built environment and everyday life. Over the last few decades, multiple agents have been involved in reviving the district's Ottoman heritage, namely, Sufi orders, Muslim civil society organizations, and current government projects to restore Ottoman-era buildings. Drawing upon historical and ethnographic data collected in the district, the article argues that the meaning and function of Ottoman heritage are not static entities; rather, they are discursively constituted within shifting socio-political and economic contexts. While acknowledging the increasing commodification of tangible heritage in post-colonial Muslim cities, the article sheds light on how both shared and contested forms of belonging to the institutional and intellectual heritage of Islamic tradition, mediated by Ottoman-era architectural complexes and spaces, broaden our understanding of living heritage.

Keywords: Ottoman heritage, architecture, Istanbul, Islam, urbanism

In February 2022, a public controversy erupted concerning the protection of the silhouette of the Süleymaniye Mosque complex in the historical peninsula of Istanbul (Fatih Municipality). Ilim Yayma Vakfı (The Foundation for the Dissemination of Islamic Knowledge; hereafter, Ilim Yayma) had been constructing a student dormitory a few streets ahead of the mosque complex, overlooking the Golden Horn River and the Bosphorus Straight. The construction was criticized by many for obstructing the historical silhouette of the Süleymaniye mosque, which has been treasured since its construction in the seventeenth century. The controversy garnered local and national news coverage and sparked intense debates and discussions on social media.[1] According to Ilim Yayma, the property had been donated to them by the owners on the condition that it be used as a student dormitory. They decided to demolish and reconstruct

1. The controversy gained public attention when the General Secretary of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Mahir Polat, tweeted: "This structure rising in front of Süleymaniye is the new building of the Ilim Yayma Vakfı. In April 2019, the IBB (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality) of the time made the project, got it approved by the conservation board and started construction. Even though it is authorized, this is a persecution against a treasure like the silhouette of the Süleymaniye Mosque," accessed November 10, 2023, https://twitter/com/mhpolat/status/1488913278063587333/photo/2.

the building as it was not earthquake-resistant. Since the neighborhood where the mosque is located is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the reconstruction project had to be approved by the Istanbul Board of Monuments.

As the controversy continued, the property owners asked Ilim Yayma to stop the construction. The current Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu, also promised during a press conference that he would do whatever was necessary to stop the construction and protect the silhouette. Eventually, the Ilim Yayma had to stop the construction and release a public statement:

> Süleymaniye is the *ruh* (spirit) of Istanbul. The reason for the existence of the İlim Yayma Vakfı is to protect this *ruh*. We will not advance any initiative that may harm the *ruh* of Süleymaniye. We declare that we are ready to make every sacrifice to preserve the silhouette of Süleymaniye.[2]

The usage of the word *ruh* or 'spirit' is quite important to note here, as it has often been used over the last few decades by many Sunni Muslim groups in Istanbul in an attempt to restore the Ottoman architectural, institutional, and intellectual heritage of the city.[3] One of the main objectives of the Ilim Yayma, a civil society organization established in 1951 to spread Islamic knowledge and education, is to facilitate the preservation of the Ottoman-Islamic intellectual legacy. For the same purpose, they have been involved in restoring and renovating many Ottoman-era buildings in the historical Fatih district over the last few years with the support of the Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party; hereafter AKP). Ironically, in this specific context, the controversy was brought into the light of the Istanbul public by the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (People's Republican Party; hereafter CHP), the secular party, which had been accused of neglecting the Ottoman heritage of the city during the early years of the Republican Turkey.

Figure 1: The Silhouette of the Süleymaniye Mosque Complex overshadowed by the construction of the student dormitory.[4]

2. Ilim Yayma Vakfı (@ilimyaymavakfi), "Kamuoyuna Duyuru," Twitter, February 6, 2022, 4:34 a.m. https://twitter.com/ilimyaymavakfi/status/1490287848628625411/photo/1.
3. The word *ruh* is an Arabic term, also used in Turkish, which can be loosely translated in English as 'spirit.'
4. Polat, Mahir (@mhrpolat), "Süleymaniye'nin önünde yükselen bu yapı İlim Yayma Vakfı'nın yaptığı yeni binası," Twitter, February 2, 2022, 9:32 a.m. https://x.com/mhrpolat/status/1488913278063587333.

The controversy provides insight into contemporary Istanbul's intricate and competing political and social landscape of heritage restoration and preservation. Furthermore, the incident illustrates that it is not just the preservation of the everyday functionality of Ottoman-era buildings that state and non-state actors are contesting, but also the visual representation of the Ottoman heritage in the city. Though the AKP lost the Istanbul Metropolitan mayoralty in 2019 and in 2024 to CHP, their success in the Fatih Municipality has led them to create a renewed interest in reviving the legacy of Ottoman heritage in the historical peninsula. The current mayor of the Fatih Municipality, Ergun Turan, has also constantly evoked the word *ruh* to signify the importance of reviving the Ottoman-era intellectual and cultural heritage along with the physical restoration of many Ottoman architectures.[5]

For many observers, the revival and reclaiming the *ruh* of the Ottoman heritage reflects the ideological project of the present-day Turkish political landscape. The literature on Turkey has understood religious revivalism and its spatial expression as a facet of the larger political and neo-liberal economic changes the nation has experienced since the 1980s.[6] According to this scholarship, the transfer of power from secular elites to religious conservatives has led to the resurgence of pious Islamic lifestyles, along with the revival of Ottoman cultural discourses, which are mediated through various institutions and spaces.[7] Undeniably, the restoration and revival initiatives in contemporary Istanbul intersect with the larger political and economic interests of the current ruling government led by the AKP. Since the early 1990s, after the Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party; hereafter RP) won the Istanbul municipal elections, various efforts were made to restore Istanbul's Ottoman heritage. With economic success in the 2000s, the restoration and preservation of the Ottoman heritage of Istanbul and other cities in Turkey became an essential project of the AKP. Given this context – i.e., the conservative Muslims' (or Islamists) ascendancy to political power and their efforts to reclaim the Ottoman legacy – the discourse of heritage preservation and management is understood as a top-down process, where the agency to shape urban heritage is determined largely by the competing political elites.

However, over the past two decades, the diversification of competing Muslim publics has prompted a reassessment of the secular versus religious binary that has traditionally dominated the public and scholarly discourse on socio-religious and political changes in Turkey.[8] It has been observed that placing too much emphasis on social and political movements and the implied dichotomy of secularism versus Islamism "obscures the ways in which different shades of the pious and the nonreligious are divided within themselves (rather than merely between each other) in the intricacies of daily life."[9] Thus, instead of focusing solely on the contestation between Islamist and secular groups over the preservation of Istanbul's Ottoman heritage, or viewing it merely as a reflection of the neoliberal reforms Turkey has undergone in recent decades, this article will analyze the issue as a historical and sociological process in which the competing interests and aspirations of different groups of people are negotiated in relation to the city's

5. Fatih Belediyesi, "İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal Sergisi'nde Neler Var?" YouTube Video, 37:25, June 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpEr0XdRXds&ab_channel=FatihBelediyesi.
6. See Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan, and Ahmet Oncu, eds., *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), and Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).
7. See Jeremy Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
8. See: Berna Turam, "Ordinary Muslims: Power and Space in Everyday Life," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011): 144–146, and Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor, "Post-Secular Geographies and the Problem of Pluralism: Religion and Everyday Life in Istanbul, Turkey," *Political Geography* 46 (2015): 21–30.
9. See Turam, "Ordinary Muslims," 145.

Ottoman past in the twentieth century.[10] The article specifically draws and builds upon recent interventions in heritage studies that seek to advance people-centered research that apprehends the individuals' and communities' affective relationship with the tangible and intangible cultures of the past as a living and dialogic process.[11]

The research findings in this article are based on historical and ethnographic data collected in the Fatih district of Istanbul.[12] The district's historical importance is owed to a foundational moment in 1463, when the Ottoman ruler Fatih Sultan Mehmet (ca.1432–1481) decided to build a mosque complex (eventually came to be known as Fatih *Kulliyesi*) larger and taller than the Church of Hagia Sophia, the Christian symbol of the Byzantine Empire. Furthermore, the construction of additional monumental mosque complexes, Sufi lodges, cemeteries, and shrines in the later Ottoman period transformed the district into a space reflecting the enduring political and socio-religious presence of the Islamic and Ottoman urban traditions. Despite the spatial changes brought about by Ottoman modernization and Republican secularization in Istanbul, the district has largely preserved its Ottoman-Islamic character in its built environment. Over the past few decades, various agents have initiated efforts to revive the district's Ottoman-Islamic intellectual and cultural heritage, including Sufi orders, Muslim civil society organizations, and government policies aimed at restoring Ottoman architecture. The Fatih district serves as an effective case study for complicating the dominant conception of heritage discourse by highlighting the involvement of multiple actors in preserving the institutional, intellectual, and material culture of the Ottoman past. By examining the interests of both elites and ordinary people, this article demonstrates that the meaning and value of heritage are not static; rather, they are discursively shaped within shifting socio-political and economic contexts.

Towards Understanding a Living Heritage

The concept of heritage has undergone significant transformations over the past century. While previously heritage discourse narrowly focused on tangible properties, it has since expanded, and heritage is now viewed as a dynamic, culturally situated, and socially negotiated process. This transformation encompasses both tangible and intangible heritage, influencing how people understand, experience, and engage with the past. Historically, heritage discourse has been dominated by European conservation policies and practices that were developed following industrialization and modernization, and also in light of the concerns over the destruction of significant cultural legacies due to war. This discourse ushered in a

10. See Ayfer Bartu, "Who Owns the Old Quarters? Rewriting Histories in a Global Era," in *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*, ed. Çağlar Keyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 31–46, and Ayşe Öncü, "The Politics of Istanbul's Ottoman Heritage in the Era of Globalism," in *Cities of the South: Citizenship and Exclusion in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Barbara Drieskens, Franck Mermier, and Heiko Wimmen (Beirut: Saqi Books, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2007), 233–264.

11. Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect, and Emotion," in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, ed. William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 443–460; Jeremy Wells, "Making a Case for Historic Place Conservation Based on People's Values," *Forum Journal* 29, no. 3 (2015): 44–62; Charles Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History: Islam, Romanticism, and Andalusia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port, eds., *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

12. In the twentieth century, the Fatih district evolved into a larger administrative province now known as Fatih Municipality, encompassing the majority of the historical peninsula of Istanbul. However, the primary focus of the fieldwork was on the Ottoman-built environment and architectural complexes of the neighborhoods around the Fatih mosque complex.

new regime of knowledge concerning the material remnants of the past, redefining how they were to be classified, preserved, and remembered. Since the late eighteenth century, heritage discourse has also become an important instrument for emerging European nation-states in shaping a shared national consciousness and memory, thereby creating an imagined community.[13] Eventually, European ideas about the preservation of historical sites became naturalized globally, creating an 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD) that emphasizes the preservation of aesthetically significant, tangible structures.[14] This discourse, codified through international charters such as the 1931 Athens Charter and the 1964 Venice Charter, universalized the Western approach to the preservation of the material past, an approach that remains reflected in the more globalized discourse on heritage that emerged following World War II. This more globalized discourse, supported by UNESCO and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) conventions, emphasizes the evaluation and recognition of tangible properties, sites, and objects through expert knowledge.[15]

In recent decades, 'critical heritage studies' (CHS), drawing significantly from the intellectual frameworks of the postcolonial and decolonial turn in the social sciences, has challenged the globalization of heritage management and preservation practices promoted by organizations such as UNESCO. Scholars have argued that the designation of 'World Heritage Sites' reinforces colonial hierarchies by privileging European norms, often marginalizing non-Western and intangible heritage, and imposing unhelpful conservation ethics and policies.[16] For example, heritage preservation in the Middle East, Africa and Asia has often prioritized monumental architectural and archaeological sites while neglecting intangible practices or vernacular forms of heritage central to local communities.[17] On the other hand, this critique intersects with studies of secularism and examines how secular epistemologies have shaped our understanding of the public/private divide, the sacred/profane distinction, and, more broadly, the very category of religion.[18] A similar compartmentalization and dichotomization can be observed in the emergence of heritage discourse in the West, which is inextricably linked to European experience of secularization and colonial legacies.[19] This discourse often distances heritage from its religious roots, emphasizing its artistic and historical significance over its everyday faith-based functions.

The secularization of European society has led to emphasize the symbolic importance of religious buildings as heritage sites. Churches, cathedrals and other religious sites of historical importance are often preserved as markers of a shared European cultural or national identity, disconnected from their original role in active worship. For instance, the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris is celebrated as a symbol of French national heritage, with its restoration following the 2019 fire framed primarily as an act of cultural

13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
14. Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).
15. Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013).
16. See Denis Byrne, "Western Hegemony in Archaeological Heritage Management," *History and Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (1991): 269–276, and Harrison, *Heritage*.
17. De Jong, Ferdinand, and M. J. Rowlands, eds., *Reclaiming Heritage: Alternative Imaginaries of Memory in West Africa* (London: Routledge, 2007); Sophia Labadi, *UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, and Outstanding Universal Value: Value-Based Analyses of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
18. See Oscar Salemink, "Afterword: Heritage as Management of Sacralities," in *Managing Sacralities: Competing and Converging Claims of Religious Heritage*, ed. Ernst van den Hemel, Oscar Salemink, and Irene Stengs (New York: Routledge, 2022), 249–259, and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
19. Smith, *Uses of Heritage,* 21.

preservation rather than the restoration of a significant religious building.[20] In the North American context, particularly in Quebec, the response to secularization and economic modernization has involved successive governments undertaking efforts to preserve religious architectural heritage by 'resacralizing' and 'patrimonializing' it as part of the secular heritage of the Quebec nation and its history.[21] This phenomenon reflects what scholars describe as the heritagization of religion or the sacred—a process through which religious sites are transformed into secular heritage to fulfill cultural, political, and economic objectives.[22] Conversely, this process can also manifest as the sacralization of heritage, where certain forms of heritage become "imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable."[23]

In the Global South, religious architecture and heritage sites are not merely preserved as cultural artifacts of the past; they continue to play an active role in mediating everyday religious practices and social relations, and in informing the politics of community belonging. As a result, scholarly understanding, public policy, and conservation ethics often fail to capture the complex ways communities engage with the idea of heritage. For instance, in Muslim-majority contexts, *waqf*s (pious endowments) have historically preserved mosques, religious schools, mausoleums, and shrines as communal heritage. These *waqf*s also facilitated the construction of monumental socio-religious complexes through patronage and played a key role in shaping the built environment of Muslim cities. This legacy continues to influence debates on heritage preservation in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world, where religious aspirations are deeply intertwined with urban renewal projects and the production of sacred spaces.[24] Consequently, new studies in the field of heritage in the Global South have prompted many to rethink the concept of heritage, which was once narrowly defined by monuments and historical artifacts considered culturally significant but largely stripped of religious meaning.

While critical heritage studies have been instrumental in unveiling eurocentrism in heritage discourse, they have "tended to deprivilege the significant affective qualities of material things and the influences the material traces of the past have on people in the contemporary world."[25] A significant number of scholarship on the Middle East has predominantly focused on heritage as a tool for nation-building and state-centralized ideological projects, often overlooking the role of communities in shaping heritage discourse at the local level.[26] This article suggests that, rather than understanding heritage solely as a top-

20. Salemink, "Afterword: Heritage as Management of Sacralities."
21. Geneviève Zubrzycki, *Beheading the Saint: Nationalism, Religion, and Secularism in Quebec* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
22. See: Ernst van den Hemel, Oscar Salemink, and Irene Stengs, eds., *Managing Sacralities: Competing and Converging Claims of Religious Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Ferdinand de Jong, "Traces of the Sacred: Loss, Hope, and Potentiality in Religious Heritage in England," in *The Future of Religious Heritage: Entangled Temporalities of the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Ferdinand de Jong and José Mapril (London: Routledge, 2023), 125–146.
23. Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte, "Heritage and the Sacred: Introduction," *Material Religion* 9, no. 3 (2013): 277.
24. On the topic of the transformation of *waqf* in both concept and practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Nada Moumtaz, *God's Property: Islam, Charity, and the Modern State* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), and Reyhan Sabri, *The Imperial Politics of Architectural Conservation: The Case of Waqf in Cyprus* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019). See also Timur Hammond, "Heritage and the Middle East: Cities, Power, and Memory," *Geography Compass* 14, no. 2 (2020): 1-13, and Rami Daher and Irene Maffi, eds., *The Politics and Practices of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East: Positioning the Material Past in Contemporary Societies* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
25. Harrison, *Heritage,* 9.
26. See: Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, eds., *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Ayşe Öncü, "The Politics of Istanbul's Ottoman

down process instrumentalized to build national identity and serve political and economic interests, a more constructive approach would be to examine how the concept of heritage is discursively shaped through the interactions between nations and communities in both historical and contemporary contexts. The idea of living heritage challenges Eurocentric and top-down perspectives by emphasizing heritage as an active, dynamic process shaped by everyday cultural and religious practices, intellectual traditions, historical memory, and communal identity. This approach also shifts the focus from an exclusive emphasis on the politics of representation to the affective qualities of heritage, exploring how material and intangible practices interact and are mediated by people and objects.

While acknowledging the increasing commodification of tangible heritage in post-colonial Muslim cities,[27] the article sheds light on how both shared and contested forms of belonging (often nostalgic) to the institutional and intellectual heritage of Islamic tradition, mediated by Ottoman-era architectural complexes and spaces, broaden our understanding of living heritage in contemporary Turkey. This approach also provides valuable insights into how multiple articulations of Islam are intricately linked to the evolving material culture and built environment, shaping everyday religious practices, social relations and community belonging in the Muslim world. The next two sections of the article will provide a brief historical overview of the development of the Fatih District during the Ottoman period, highlighting its role as an important social and intellectual center of Ottoman Istanbul, as well as the transformation the city and district underwent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Fatih District: A Historical-Sociological Portrait

A well-known quote attributed to the Ottoman ruler Mehmed II (1431–1481) says, "The true craft in laying the foundations of a city is to cultivate prosperity in the hearts of the people."[28] This saying has often been quoted to me by interlocutors in the field when they shared their thoughts on the urban transformation of the city and the Fatih district in the last century. One also comes across this quote in local magazines and online blogs that cover topics such as city and civilization, Ottoman heritage, Ottoman Istanbul, etc.[29] In the public discourse, the idealized vision of an Ottoman Istanbul or an Islamic city continues to inform many. During my fieldwork, one of my queries was to look for the material mediums through which such visions are aspired, mediated, and contested in the district. In doing so, this section will examine what forms of philosophical, religious, and cultural visions shaped Ottoman urbanism after the conquest of Istanbul. How did the Fatih district come to epitomize these visions both discursively and materially?

The historical importance of shaping the Fatih district's Ottoman built environment owes itself to the foundational moment when Mehmed II ordered the construction of the Fatih mosque complex. This foundational moment can be considered a rupture from Byzantine urbanism and the beginning of a new form of sociality and spatiality informed by Ottoman-Islamic urban traditions.[30] The construction of the

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Heritage in the Era of Globalism," in *Cities of the South: Citizenship and Exclusion in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Barbara Drieskens, Franck Mermier, and Heiko Wimmen (Beirut: Saqi Books, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2007), 233–264; Courtney M. Dorroll and Philip Dorroll, *Spatial Politics in Istanbul: Turning Points in Contemporary Turkey* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

27. Hammond, "Heritage and the Middle East", 7.

28. The quote in Ottoman Turkish: "Hüner bir şehrin bünyad etmektir, Reaya kalbin abad etmektir." *Fatih Mehmed II Vakfiyeleri* (Ankara: Vakiflar Umum Mudurlugu Nesriyati, 1938), 36.

29. For example, see Erhan Erken, "Erhan Erken'in gözüyle şehir ve medeniyet," accessed June 10, 2024, https://erhanerken.com/2020/05/01/erhan-erkenin-gozuyle-sehir-ve-medeniyet-i/.

30. Halil Inalcık, "Istanbul: An Islamic City," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990): 1–23.

complex was one of the most innovative and revolutionary acts in the history of Ottoman architectural projects commissioned up to that time. It was accomplished by incorporating medieval and early modern architectural practices to institutionalize the political and socio-religious order of the empire.[31] Thus, instead of depending on the existing Middle Eastern and Central Asian architectural designs with which the Ottomans were familiar, Mehmed II and the ruling elites of the empire accommodated and assimilated the Byzantine and Roman architectural visions and practices. In particular, the Florentine architect Filarete's (c. 1400–1469) anticipated visit to Istanbul suggests the influence of his architectural philosophy of rational and symmetrical measurements in the construction.[32] Finally, the evolution of Ottoman architectural practices in the previous capitals of the empire, Bursa and Edirne, certainly influenced the design of the mosque complex.[33]

The mosque complex embodied the growing centralization and institutionalization of the empire as it brought various socio-religious functions under one complex. The mosque was situated in the center of the complex, surrounded by eight higher learning *madrasa*s (colleges) and eight preparatory *madrasa*s, a primary school, a library, and an *imaret* complex with a hospital, a soup kitchen, and a caravanserai. The mosque in the center of the complex was a space for the Muslim community to perform daily prayers, attend the Friday congregational prayer, and other Islamic rituals. The Sahn-i Seman *madrasa*s of the complex became the most important institution of higher learning in the empire. Mehmed II showed specific interest in providing patronage to the *'ulama'* (religious scholars; sing., '*alim*) community to support the empire's bureaucratic and urban administrative needs and to guide the newly settled Muslim community of the city.[34] While the functioning of the mosque complex fulfilled the empire's need for scholarly bureaucrats, the neighborhoods that grew around it became the religious and intellectual heart of Ottoman Istanbul.[35] The increasing number of students who came to study from the different parts of the empire at the Sahn *madrasa*s transformed the district into a hub for scholarly learning and exchanges.[36]

Mehmet II was buried inside the complex upon his death in 148I. Mehmed II's son Beyazit II (r. 1481–1512) erected a mausoleum at the site of his father's tomb. Ottoman urban historian of the eighteenth century, Hafiz Ayvansaray (d.1752), emphasizes that the tomb of Mehmet II, which features headgear typical of the Ottoman *'ulama'* tombs in the empire, reflects his investment in scholarly discourses as well as the patronage he provided for the *'ulama'* community.[37] The burial of Mehmet II inside the complex initiated a new architectural tradition in the empire, one of burying Ottoman Sultans inside the walled city

31. Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 68.
32. Kenneth Hayes argues that Filarete's architectural treatise had also influenced the construction of the star shaped Yedikule Fort. The symmetric architectural design of Fatih *Kulliye* and Yedikule Fort provides circumstantial evidence of Filarete's presence in Istanbul. For more, see: Kenneth Hayes, "Filarete's Journey to the East," in *Oriental Occidental: Geography, Identity, Space*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Ülker Berke Copur, ACSA International Conference Paper Proceedings (2001): 168–171, https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/filaretes-journey-to-the-east/, and Nilgun Kiper, "Osmanli İstanbul'unda Kentsel Mekânin Değişim Süreci," in *Antik Çağ'dan XXI. Yüzyıla Büyük İstanbul Tarihi*, Vol. I, ed. Coşkun Yılmaz (Istanbul: İBB Kültür A.Ş. : Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2015). Available online at: https://istanbultarihi.ist/21-osmanli-istanbulunda-kentsel-mekanin-degisim-sureci.
33. See, Kafescioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul*.
34. Fahri Unan, *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Fâtih Külliyesi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 2003).
35. Unan, *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Fâtih Külliyesi*.
36. Mehmet Ipşirli, "Osmanli İstanbul'unda Geleneksel Eğitim Ve Ulema," in Mehmet Ipşirli (ed.), *Antik Çağ'dan XXI. Yüzyıla Büyük İstanbul Tarihi*, Vol. IX, ed. Coşkun Yılmaz (Istanbul: İBB Kültür A.Ş. : Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2015). Available online at: https://istanbultarihi.ist/331-osmanli-istanbulunda-geleneksel-egitim-ve-ulema.
37. Hafiz Hüseyin Ayvansarayi, *Hadikatü'l-Cevami': Camilerimiz Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Tercüman, [1865] 1987).

of Istanbul adjacent to the signature religious complexes they had built during their reign.[38] To the present day, the Mausoleum of Mehmet II has been a place not only for pilgrimage and veneration, but also to recall his political and socio-religious religious achievements, as well as the architectural innovations he initiated after the conquest of the city.

Until the early twentieth century, the district remained an important urban locality that hosted numerous religious institutions and mediated scholarly networks and a lifeworld representing Ottoman urbanism's religious and cultural discourses. The district gradually became known as *"Ulama' Semti*' (the district of religious scholars), with the settlement of the Ottoman '*ulama*' class, Sufi adepts, and other elites of the Ottoman bureaucracy. The late nineteenth century Ottoman diplomat and poet Abdulhak Hamid's (1852–1937) poem on his visit to the Mausoleum of Mehmet II ("Merkad-i Fatihi Ziyaret") captures the political and spiritual importance of the mausoleum to the people of Istanbul and Islamic history. The poem, framed inside one of the Mausoleum's walls in 1916, played an important role in emphasizing the mausoleum as more spiritually blessed than any of the Ottoman lands.[39] Elevating the personality of Mehmed II to a saintly figure and the mausoleum as a site of veneration has eventually given birth to a cemetery complex (Fatih *haziresi*) in front of the mausoleum where a number of important religious, political, and literary figures of the city are buried.[40] The complex gradually became the resting place of Ottoman Istanbul's grand muftis and viziers, religious scholars, saints, bureaucrats, calligraphers, writers, and poets- imparting a continuous spiritual aura and sacrality to the district.[41]

Negotiations with the Ottoman Modernization and Republican Secularization

The late Ottoman modernization project reflected an intensive process of adaptation to the urbanism of the new age dominated by European powers. With the gradual loss of external political domination and increased contact with hegemonic European powers and Western modernity, there was a pressing need for institutional and social reform within the empire. In response, the Ottoman state initiated the *Tanzimat* reforms, intended to bring about broad changes within the bureaucratic, political, religious, and cultural spheres of Ottoman society. Although the experience of Istanbul would differ from the colonial encounter of other Ottoman provinces and cities, European hegemony was influential in creating various contours of urban modernity. The neighborhood structures based on religious institutions started to change, and the Ottoman-Islamic tradition that had hitherto structured the urbanism of the city was increasingly questioned. The role played by religious institutions and authorities in organizing the social life of the neighborhood gave way to modern administrative systems.[42] *Tanzimat* reforms also ignited new modes of urban life and gradually shifted people's perception of public life around religious spaces.[43]

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38. Gülru Necipoğlu, "Anatolia and the Ottoman Legacy," in *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, ed. Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Muhammad Al-Asad (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 141–157.
39. Ömer Faruk Akün, "Abdülhak Hâmid'in Merkad-i Fâtih'i Ziyâret Manzumesi ve İçindeki Görüşler," *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi* 7 (1956): 61–104.
40. İHÜ Kültür Sanat, "Dursun Gürlek | Ulema Semti Fatih," YouTube video, 1:09:42, January 31, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOAy6nHR-ZY&ab_channel=%C4%B0H%C3%9CK%C3%BClt%C3%BCrSanat.
41. Ali R. Ozcan, "Tarih," in *Türk Kültür ve Medeniyet Tarihinde Fatih Külliyesi-Hazire*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür A.Ş, 2007), 30–79.
42. Cem Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul: Fruit Vendors and Civil Servants in the Kasap Ilyas Mahalle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
43. Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

One of the most important effects of the *Tanzimat* reforms was reflected in the urban administration and the attempts to reorganize the city's built environment according to the principles and needs of modern urbanism. It commenced with the founding of "The Commission for the Improvement of Roads" (*Islahat-i Turuk Komisyonu*). The commission's main objective was to replace the "irrational" street patterns and dead ends that characterized the urban landscape of the city with a more rational and geometrical construction of roads and boulevards.[44] Several religious and non-religious buildings that flanked the streets were demolished during the widening of the streets, having a significant impact upon the built environment of the city. This new vision towards transforming Istanbul into a modern city gradually transformed not only the physical characteristics but also the social life and spatial practices informed by the premodern institutions.

In 1836, the establishment of the "Ministry of Pious Foundations" (*Nezaret-i Evkaf-i Humayun*) centralized the administration of *waqf*s, leading to the loss of their financial independence and legal autonomy.[45] In 1854, with the founding of *sehremaneti* (municipality), the role of the *qadi* (judge) in overseeing the *waqf*s' administration was passed on to municipality officials. As a result, the urban administration primarily operated by *qadi*s through the *waqf*-endowed institutions gradually started losing its economic and social functions. The declining role of the *qadi*s and other religious authorities in urban life, who were the product of the Ottoman *madrasa* education system, led to an increasing perception that the maintenance of so many monumental religious complexes and other religious buildings was unnecessary and expensive.[46]

During the same period, increased centralization attempts of the Ottoman Empire, politically and socially, led to the construction of new religious buildings in the Fatih district. For example, the construction of the Hırka-i Şerif Mosque in 1851 during the reign of Sultan Abdul Mecid I (1823–1861) played a central role in affirming the district's spiritual connection to Islamic history. The main purpose of the mosque was to preserve and display the mantle of prophet Muhammed during the month of Ramadan (gifted by the Uwais al-Qarani family from Yemen)—a tradition that continues until today. The construction of new religious buildings not only represented imperial aspirations to make the district, and the surrounding regions, an important center of the Muslim world, but also helped it distinguish itself as a conservative Muslim space that existed in sharp contrast to the other Europeanized and secularized districts and quarters of Istanbul in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

If the primary concern of the late Ottoman urban reform was to adapt the Ottoman built environment to modern urbanism, the secular vision of the Republican era anticipated a rupture from the Ottoman past both materially and socially.[47] Though the Ottoman modernization did not significantly

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44. Nur Altinyildiz, "The Architectural Heritage of Istanbul and the Ideology of Preservation," *Muqarnas* 24, no. 1 (2007): 281–305.

45. The *waqf* or pious endowments operated as a meta-institutional infrastructure in Muslim societies to support religious, educational, and charitable services. It facilitated a bottom-up process of urbanization by upholding religious norms and values in the public spheres and spaces of the city, contributing to the flourishing of a cosmopolitan civility. See Armando Salvatore, *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016). In the Ottoman context, the *waqf* emerged as a socio-religious and legal principle on which Ottoman rulers urbanized cities with long-lasting properties and institutions. The *waqf*-endowed institutions Islamized the urban space and gave Ottoman characteristics to the overall built environment in the long term. They also helped in urban administration as neighborhoods and districts grew around the *waqf* endowed socio-religious complexes. See Behar, *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul*, and Boyar and Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul*.

46. Altinyildiz, "The Architectural Heritage of Istanbul," 284.

47. Murat Gül, *The Emergence of Modern Istanbul: Transformation and Modernisation of a City* (London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009).

impact the Fatih district's built environment during the first few decades of the Republican period, the district gradually started losing its socio-religious function. An important factor that helped to reengineer the built environment of the district and the city towards secularization was through the confiscation of *waqf* properties. When the *waqf* properties lost their socio-religious and economic function, the landscape of the city became an experimental ground for executing different urban development policies. In particular, the founders of the new Republic implemented an urban vision that would make the premodern Ottoman institutions and their functions insignificant. The restriction of activities in the mosques to daily prayers and the closure of religious institutions such as *madrasas* and Sufi lodges led to the reconfiguration of the religious lifeworld and spatial practices that depended on those sites.

The Politics of Reclaiming the Ottoman Heritage

A broader dichotomous perception of the politics of Ottoman heritage preservation that has existed in the Turkish public sphere over the last few decades can be understood as follows: the Islamists' narrative claims that secularists abandoned Ottoman heritage since the fall of the empire, while the secularists' narrative argues that Ottoman-era buildings are being restored for the Islamization of urban spaces and neoliberal profit-making. However, this perception fails to comprehend the complex process of urban transformation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as its impact on the Ottoman built environment and everyday life in the city. Since the Fatih district is home to many Ottoman architectural complexes, the district provides a much more nuanced insight into how various intersecting aspirations are played out in the restoration of the city's Ottoman heritage. This section will offer a broad overview of the shifting political contexts in which heritage preservation has been contested and negotiated since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

Previously, we discussed how the Ottoman built environment of the historical peninsula of Istanbul transformed, beginning with nineteenth century Ottoman modernization. Later, the Republican vision to secularize the city in the twentieth century aimed to put an end to the discourse of urbanism informed by Ottoman and Islamic visions. During the first few years of the Republican era, Istanbul was neglected due to its irreplaceable Ottoman heritage, as the Republic devoted all of its energy and limited resources to making Ankara a secular city and the new capital of the Turkish Republic.[48] However, by the 1930s, attention turned toward the urban transformation of Istanbul. With this aim, the Republican elites approved the French urbanist Henri Prost's urban development plan for Istanbul, which primarily aimed to reduce traffic congestion, construct large boulevards, and preserve the "cultural" heritage of the historical peninsula. While Proust's proposed plan (1939–1950) sought to protect the sites and silhouette of the historical peninsula, it was also instrumental in the physical transformation of Istanbul into a Western and secular city. For instance, the introduction of boulevards and public promenades sought to replace Ottoman-era Islamic sites for social gatherings, such as mosques and *imaret* courtyards. Proust's experience with the urban planning and transformation of North African Islamic cities in French colonies was one of the reasons he was assigned to develop a master plan for the city.[49]

Besides the urban development plans executed in the 1930s and 1940s by the Republican state, the increasing Anatolian migration to Istanbul in the 1950s and the mass construction of commercial and

48. Zeynep Kezer, *Building Modern Turkey: State, Space, and Ideology in the Early Republic* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). Also see, Gül, *The Emergence of Modern Istanbul*.
49. Murat Gül and Richard Lamb, "Urban Planning in Istanbul in the Early Republican Period," *Architectural Theory Review* 9, no. 1 (2004): 59–81.

residential properties also significantly contributed to the transformation of the Ottoman built environment of the city. Particularly, since the historical peninsula of Istanbul faced challenges such as an escalating population, a housing crisis, and traffic congestion, then Prime Minister, Adnan Menderes (1899–1961), who portrayed himself as the advocate for the newly settled conservative immigrants, initiated the construction of new roads by demolishing old urban structures, including various Ottoman-era buildings. Menderes took a special interest in implementing Henri Proust's urban development plan, and the urban development projects carried out between 1956 and 1960, famously known as the Menderes Operation, created controversies by demolishing numerous religious buildings and sites of the historical peninsula, specifically around the Fatih district.

Ironically, during the same period, in response to the early Republican visions and attempts to secularize the city, Adnan Menderes, along with many conservative Muslims, developed a discourse centered on the "second conquest" of Istanbul ("*fetih etmek*"), with the goal of restoring the Ottoman-Islamic character of the city.[50] In one of his speeches, Menderes said,

> Is this how Istanbul should have been? A pearl of a city in the world? Our beautiful mosques are lost in [traffic] jams like antiques dumped into junk! They need to be brought out into daylight. Certainly, this is not merely the task of the municipality. It is a part of the great task of the state. […] I consider myself indebted to Istanbul as one of the Republic generations. […] The first thing to be done: is Istanbul against Beyoğlu.[51]

The implementation of this discourse in urban development projects came to an end with the military coup d'état of 1960 and the subsequent trial of Adnan Menderes and his ministers. However, the narrative over the second conquest of Istanbul, as well as the aspirations for reclaiming Ottoman-Islamic heritage, continued to inform both nationalist and Islamist movements that emerged to be influential in the historical peninsula in the coming decades.

As Istanbul boasts of representing the architectural heritage of the Ottoman and Byzantine empires, promoting the city as a bridge connecting the East and West became increasingly prominent among Republican secularists, nationalists, and conservatives in the 1980s. The success of the Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party; hereafter AP) in 1982, in the first parliamentary elections following the military coup d'état of 1980, resulted in the gradual liberalization of the Turkish economy. Under the banner of the AP, the elected Prime Minister, Turgut Özal, successfully formed a political alliance that included conservative, nationalist, and center-right interests. This alliance significantly helped Özal to implement the new economic reforms without much opposition from the Kemalist elites.[52]

The new reforms would give an increasing role to local municipalities in urban governance and open the way for private investment in the business and tourism sectors.[53] This shift resulted in a change in the attitude of the secular ruling elites toward Istanbul, which they had previously neglected in the early

50. Öncü, "The Politics of Istanbul's Ottoman Heritage." Also see, Pınar Aykaç, *Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula: Musealization and Urban Conservation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).
51. Ipek Akpinar, "Urbanization Represented in the Historical Peninsula: Turkification of Istanbul in the 1950s," in *Mid-Century Modernism in Turkey: Architecture Across Cultures in the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Meltem O Gürel (London: Routledge, 2016), 57.
52. Cihan Tugal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Also see, Güldem Baykal, "'All Dominion Belongs to Allah… Capital Get Out': The Issue of Social Justice and Muslim Anti-Capitalists in Turkey," *Crosscurrents* 66, no. 2 (2016): 239–51.
53. Çağlar Keyder, "The Setting," in *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*, ed. Çağlar Keyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 3–28.

decades after the founding of the Turkish Republic due to its irreplaceable Ottoman-Islamic heritage. Caglar Keyder notes that the "liberalism of the 1980s had important political consequences for Istanbul, especially in the changing attitude toward urban autonomy, which led to Istanbul's local government acquiring funds for rebuilding the city."[54] In 1984, after winning the Istanbul Municipal elections, the mayor of Istanbul, Bedrettin Daylan, proposed a strategic plan for the urban redevelopment of Istanbul to transform the neglected Ottoman capital into a global city.[55] The historical peninsula of Istanbul and the Europeanized districts of Pera-Beyoğlu were identified as ideal locations to be transformed into urban centers for tourism, cultural consumption, and entertainment.[56]

On the other hand, alongside economic liberalization, the growing influence of Islamist movements in the Turkish public sphere led to the emergence of efforts to restore Istanbul's Ottoman-Islamic heritage.[57] They managed to develop a narrative where "Istanbul represents the organic unity and justice of Ottoman (read "Islamic") rule, embodying a pristine purity before the Westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century."[58] This discourse gained prominence during the Istanbul Municipal election campaign of Recep Tayyip Erdogan under the RP in 1994. One of the central themes of Erdogan's election campaign was the second conquest of Istanbul after it fell into the hands of Westernizing and secularizing Kemalist elites who undermined the centuries-long Ottoman legacy initiated since its first conquest by Mehmed II in 1453.[59] The politics of reclaiming the Ottoman legacy in contemporary Istanbul should therefore be understood as "critical interventions in public space, for they constitute grounds for Islamist challenges to cultural heritage policy of the secular Turkish state."[60]

The concrete efforts to restore the Ottoman legacy and the Islamic character of Istanbul and other cities in the country accelerated with the success of the AKP in the 2002 national elections. The turn toward neoliberal economic growth relying on tourism and the construction sector has significantly influenced the politics of preserving and managing heritage sites in Istanbul over the last two decades. The AKP successfully implemented a drastic urban renewal model, emphasizing the increasing role of municipalities in restoring and managing local historical monuments and sites. In 2005, the approval of the Historic Peninsula Conservation Master Plan granted local municipal and state authorities access to funding to carry out restoration projects throughout the entire region of the historical peninsula. The restoration of Ottoman buildings that had been demolished during various periods in the twentieth century became central. The restoration also aimed to musealize specific districts, such as Sultan Ahmed and Eminönü, transforming them into an urban spectacle for global tourism by highlighting the Ottoman and Byzantine heritage.[61]

Contested Belongings to a Living Heritage

On May 1st, 2012, a group of young conservative Muslim men and women offered a symbolic funeral prayer at the courtyard of the Fatih mosque complex for the workers who had died due to workplace

54. Keyder, "The Setting," 16.
55. Aykaç, *Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*.
56. Ayfer Bartu, "Who Owns the Old Quarters? Rewriting Histories in a Global Era," in *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*, ed. Çağlar Keyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 31–46.
57. Aykaç, *Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*.
58. Bartu, "Who Owns the Old Quarters?", 39.
59. Güldem Baykal, "Conquering Istanbul: The Controversy Over the Taksim Mosque Project," *Anthropology in Action* 11 (2004): 22–31.
60. Baykal, "Conquering Istanbul", 22.
61. Aykaç, *Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*.

accidents in Turkey. The group, who identified themselves as the "Anti-Capitalist Muslims," marched to Taksim Square in the Beyoglu district after the prayer. The march was accompanied by banners and slogans such as "Ownership and property belong to God," "Bread and freedom come from God," and "Long live revolutionary Islam."[62] The event was identified as exceptional and perplexing for many across the Turkish political spectrum—while conservative religious communities were perplexed by the timing (May1st is a day celebrated by Turkish communists, who are traditionally viewed as being atheists and opponents of Islam), secular leftists found the theological language jarring, as leftist political activism in Turkey is rarely informed by theological language. The event thus marked a significant shift in Turkish politics, especially among conservative Muslims in Istanbul. It demonstrated that, by coming together to express solidarity for political and economic justice, it is possible to bridge the secular versus religious divide amongst the public.[63]

Ihsan Eliaçık, the founder of the platform and one of the prominent Muslim left intellectuals in contemporary Turkey, is a vehement critic of AKP's political and economic policies. Eliaçık, who came to Istanbul in the 1970s, became a part of various intellectual circles with the Islamist groups that were active in the Fatih district. However, he eventually became disappointed with the failure of Islamists to develop a political discourse critical of the economic and social injustices produced by capitalism. He notes that:

> Right now, most of Turkey is being governed by individuals who were active in Fatih. Many important figures around Erdogan hail from this area. Because Islamism thrived here, and the heart of the Islamists was in Fatih. Now, these Islamist circles have been embracing capitalism with ablution (*abdest*). Islamic activism and services have now lost their real purpose. It's all about securing business and making a profit. The old Islamic Fatih is disappearing. Many of them have also shifted towards right-wing politics. Their agenda has simply become about gaining control of municipalities, political power, and profit-making.[64]

Eliaçık's observation resonates with many critics of the AKP, who believe that the party's rule over the last twenty years has brought about a significant shift in socioeconomic and religious life in Turkey. He notes that the party, who rose to power with the promise of just economic development, has been implementing neoliberal urbanism and gentrification projects that prioritize the accumulation of capital over the needs of the people. Eliaçık and his platform have not only developed an intellectual critique of the AKP, but have also urged political activists to fight for the cause of economic justice with a broad spectrum of political alliances. For the same reason, the group was quite actively involved during the Gezi Park protests of 2013, when the AKP-led government planned to replace Gezi Park with a shopping mall in Taksim Square. The Gezi protests raised larger questions about the sustainability of urban renewal policies in Istanbul, which focused on gentrification projects and the commodification of Ottoman heritage for profit-making.[65]

The critique advanced by Eliaçık and many others among conservative circles over a decade reflects not only the emergence of a new political discourse against the Islamist absorption of capitalism,

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62. Haber Turk. "Antikapitalist Müslüman Gençler 1 Mayıs'ta," accessed October 30, 2023, https://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/875433-antikapitalist-musluman-gencler-1-mayista.

63. Baykal, "'All Dominion Belongs to Allah… Capital Get Out.'" Also see, Yusuf Ekinci, "Kimlikten Sınıfa: İslam Hareketlerinin Dönüşümü ve Anti-kapitalist Müslümanlar," in *The Proceedings of the Fourth Turkish Studies Congress*, vol. 1, 147–61 (2015).

64. Ihsan Eliaçık, Interviewed by author, Istanbul, June 26, 2021. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality. Except for this interview, the names of interviewees are changed by mutual agreement.

65. Erdem Damar, "Complexities of the Secular/Islamic Divide and Multiple Secularisms in Turkey: The Anti-Capitalist Muslims in the 'Gezi Park' Protests," *Studia Sociologica* 4, no. 1 (2014): 110–125.

but also the transformation of everyday urban life in traditional districts such as Fatih, which initially resisted the contours of the neoliberal globalization of Turkish society. The economic liberalization and the drastic urban "renewal" development projects have drastically transformed social life in many districts of the historical peninsula. The boom in the tourism sector since the early 2000s has led to an increase in the number of housing properties being converted into boutique hotels, restaurants, and businesses. Many houses in Sultan Ahmed, Beyazit, and Eminönü districts were repurposed into hotels, now famously known as "boutique hotelization," to promote heritage tourism.

Simultaneously, the settlement of conservative Turkish and Kurdish immigrant communities from Anatolia contributed to creating a hegemonic Muslim public actively involved in restoring the intellectual and material legacy of the Ottoman past. The success of the Islamist RP in 1994 granted conservative communities greater access to repairing and restoring many Ottoman-era buildings in the historical peninsula. In preserving the intellectual and scholarly legacy of the district, the restoration of Ottoman-era buildings became a crucial medium. This development occurred alongside the continuous efforts of local residents and Sufi orders, such as Naqshbandis, in the district, who have consistently worked in the Republican period to preserve several mosques and *madrasa* complexes. For many old Fatih district residents—particularly those who witnessed the ruined and abandoned Ottoman buildings—the restoration projects significantly helped revive the district's Ottoman-Islamic identity. This fact is emphasized by one of the coordinators affiliated with an Islamic foundation, who runs their activities at one of the *madrasa* buildings of the Süleymaniye mosque complex,

> Before we moved to this building, it was in ruins and abandoned. It was used by some locals from the neighborhood for illegal activities. Many of the rooms were also used for storage purposes by nearby businesses. In 1999, we were permitted to open our foundation after some restoration works were carried out. Later, one of the rooms was also used by another foundation to facilitate the Hadith lessons provided by a scholar of Hanafi jurisprudence. Other restoration works were carried out over the last few years, and now most of the rooms are used by Ibn Khaldun University.[66]

On the other hand, the large-scale plans to construct new housing projects in the historical peninsula have led to the demolition of settlements in many lower-class neighborhoods. In particular, in 2005, a controversial housing project by Fatih municipality was carried out in the Hatice Sultan and Neslişah neighborhoods of the Suluküle district, which led to the displacement of the Roma community who had inhabited the region for centuries. To develop the neighborhood in an Ottoman style, the Roma community was forced to relocate to Taşoluk, a neighborhood on the periphery of Istanbul, away from their home and workplaces. Their displacement highlighted the broader implications of urban gentrification and its impact on poor and marginalized communities in the region.[67]

The transformation of everyday social life and material culture in the conservative districts of the city due to migration, political and economic shifts, and urban development projects, has gradually blurred the boundaries between religious versus secular or spiritual versus material. As the Fatih district represents an important locality in the shift of Islamic lifestyles over the last two decades, there have been diverse attitudes and approaches to it. Identified in the past as a center of Islamic activism with numerous Muslim civil society organizations, publication houses, and student hostels, the district has been transforming into a hub for trade, tourism, and entertainment, thereby altering its conservative religious identity. For instance,

66. Interview with Yusuf, July 25, 2021.
67. Aykaç, *Sultan Ahmed, Istanbul's Historic Peninsula*.

Atpazar, located a few blocks from the Fatih mosque complex, is filled with numerous cafes and serves as a meeting point for young conservative Muslims—both male and female—seeking leisure, entertainment, and socialization. While cafe culture is not new to Istanbul, places like Atpazar, which offers an alternative, non-alcoholic space for Muslim youth to socialize with tea, coffee, and hookah, illustrates how everyday life in the district is navigating the challenges posed by the neoliberal globalization of Turkish society over the past few decades.

In the 1990s, Fatih boasted of being an ideal space for conservative Muslims who wanted to resist the increasing influence of shopping malls and new modes of consumer culture in the city. The clothing stores, restaurants, Islamic banks, and other enterprises in the district, owned mainly by conservative Muslims, were more cautious and slow to experiment with changing lifestyles and market culture after Turkey's integration into the global economy. However, as some of my interlocutors remarked, as many Fatih businesses evolve into the national and capitalistic market, they have begun to compromise the Islamic principles and ethics they once sought to uphold. A public intellectual from the district notes that Fatih is a good example of a new representation of Islam—one of consumption and entertainment. This has resulted in an increase in the appearance of newly fashioned religious symbols in public life, but less interest in following and observing religious practices, ethics, and principles.[68]

Furkan, who was born and raised in Fatih, has noticed the changes in the district's conservative identity and everyday life in Fatih. He is an active member of Anadolu Gençlik Vakfi (The Foundation for the Anatolian Youth), a platform affiliated with the Islamist Saadet Party, which resisted the AKP's intellectual and political shift towards a more pragmatically oriented and moderate Islamism in the early 2000s. He shared that his colleagues give special consideration to him and other colleagues from Fatih. When there are discussions on matters related to religion, his co-workers often say they must seek the advice of people from Fatih, as they live in the socio-religious and historical center of Istanbul. However, this attitude and perception are gradually changing as Fatih has transformed into a space of consumption and entertainment.[69]

Many other interlocutors echoed similar observations regarding changes in the everyday habitus of the district. They identify this as a problem wherein, as Muslims gained access to political power and experienced economic mobility, they began to adapt their religion to new requirements and conditions. An interlocutor drew attention to how the class mobility of Muslims has impacted individual and collective religious responsibility in the public sphere: "In the past, you could tell when it was Ramadan in Fatih. Most of the restaurants and cafes used to be closed, and a spiritual atmosphere existed. Now, during Ramadan, all are open. Ramadan has turned into a month of consumption and entertainment."[70] Another interlocutor added: "Have I mentioned the open iftar events in Istanbul? In reality, a Muslim should not eat on the street. My mother never allowed me to go out with a slice of bread." What is evident from the responses of many of the interlocutors is that preservation is not just about the restoration or revival of the architectural heritage of the Ottoman past, but also about drawing attention to the important urban norms and values central to Ottoman-Islamic urbanism.

Simultaneously, changes in everyday urban life are also influenced by demographic shifts, which have contributed to the emergence of a new cosmopolitan Muslim culture by fostering interactions and engagements between Turkish and non-Turkish communities from the Middle East. While various economic and political reasons are attributed to their concentration in the district, the built environment and

68. Interview with Ali, July 13, 2021.
69. Interview with Furkan, June 9, 2021.
70. Interview with Omer August 21, 2021.

the shared Ottoman and Islamic urban heritage with cities like Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo have been important factors. An Egyptian resident in the district emphasized this:

> I chose to live in Fatih because of its religious and cultural atmosphere. You may not find the same environment in other parts of Istanbul. As Arabs, we tend to be very emotional, warm, and social. We might not prioritize the quality of the apartment we live in, but we value living in a place with mosques nearby, where we can hear the call for prayer and where it is easy to meet people and socialize.[71]

On the other hand, the increasing presence of Syrian refugee communities in the district has also generated tensions over cultural differences and lifestyles. The hate campaigns against Syrian communities became more pronounced during the 2019 Istanbul Municipal elections, when Ilay Aksoy, the Fatih Municipality candidate for the Turkish nationalist IYI party, placed an election banner proclaiming, "I will not surrender Fatih to Syrians." Consequently, in 2021, amidst rising anti-Syrian and anti-immigrant sentiment in the district, the Fatih municipality enacted a law that restricts the issuance of new permits for renting apartments to non-Turkish residents, following new migration and settlement regulations established by the Directorate General of Migration Management.

While urban renewal projects have impacted many districts in the historical peninsula, the Fatih district continues to accommodate community life and plays an important role in producing and mediating new social relations, practices, and norms. If in the 1960s and 70s it was Anatolian and Kurdish migrants, today it is the Syrian communities who have found in Fatih a place of religious and cultural affinity. One of the residents from Fatih I interviewed observed that the district has always been where poor and middle-class immigrant communities come and settle down,

> Have you heard of the song 'In Fatih, a poor gramophone is played' (Fatihte yoksul bir gramafon çalıyor)? Fatih is still poor, aged, and tired. Many buildings in the district are very old. Many immigrants and refugees live here. It has been like that for many decades. At the same time, Fatih has a *ruh* that cannot be changed easily due to its historical heritage.[72]

Considering the impact of recurring migration and the demographic changes in the Fatih district and other regions of Istanbul over the last few decades, contestations over everyday urban norms, ethics, and values are inevitable. This is significant, as it reflects the urban diversity of Istanbul before it was transformed from a multi-religious and multicultural Ottoman capital into a largely homogenous and urban Turkish culture in the twentieth century. As seen above, the inhabitants of the Fatih district have diverse attitudes about these changes, attitudes which not only provide a glimpse into how everyday belonging to the district's heritage is negotiated, but which also pave the way for imagining and aspiring to new local urban discourses. Such local discourses are significant in efforts to resist the large-scale urban development projects that have erased community life in many districts of contemporary Istanbul. Here, the continuing relevance of Ottoman architecture and the Islamic intellectual heritage of the Fatih district stands as a strong reference point to the everyday sensibilities, aspirations, and imaginations that are shared and contested by the district's inhabitants.

71. Interview with Ahmad, November 11, 2021.
72. Interview with Semih, November 3, 2021.

Conclusion

This article provides an understanding of how the Ottoman-Islamic heritage of the Fatih district serves as a medium for expressing various forms of political, religious, and cultural belonging in everyday urban life. It proposes moving beyond a top-down instrumental approach that focuses solely on how political elites compete over the question of heritage preservation in contemporary Istanbul. Instead, by examining the history and sociology of the Fatih district as a case study in living heritage, the article explores how Ottoman-era architectural complexes and spaces mediate intersecting aspirations and forms of belonging. Approaching conflicts over heritage only through the lens of identity politics overlooks the "moral strength it [heritage] gives to individual and collective narratives about the past and present through the emotional investments people make in these moments of remembering and forgetting."[73] The historical and ethnographic analysis of the Fatih district complements this observation by arguing that claims over the historical past, mediated by tangible and intangible heritage, take the shape of nostalgia, active restoration projects, and shared and contested forms of community belonging.

The historical configuration of an Ottoman-built environment through the construction of the Fatih mosque complex and other religious buildings played an important role in shaping the socio-religious identity of the Fatih district. Furthermore, religious institutions such as mosque complexes and *madrasa*s mediated scholarly authorities and hierarchies, knowledge production, and pious social-spatial practices. However, the Ottoman modernization of the nineteenth century and the changing nature of urbanism eventually led to the gradual monumentalization and heritagization of Ottoman architecture and the social functions it had in the past. The early twentieth century Republican efforts to secularize the city further ignored the Ottoman heritage. The counter-movement by Islamists to reappropriate and revive the Ottoman heritage over the last few decades has promoted a certain cultural heritage value to the material remnants of the Ottoman past.

Since the 1980s, Turkey's shift towards the global economy, along with its pursuit of neoliberal economic policies over the last two decades, have led to the musealization of the Ottoman heritage. On the other hand, these developments intersect with the everyday aspirations of district inhabitants, including various Sufi orders and civil society organizations, who seek to retrieve the old meanings and functions of various Ottoman-era buildings and institutions. While some groups are involved in restoring and revitalizing the cultural value associated with Ottoman heritage, others trace the everyday urban norms and values that have been mediated through it since Ottoman times. These intersecting aspirations and negotiations are part of the tangible and intangible heritage, or more broadly the *ruh*, of the district, which the framework of living heritage recognizes is preserved by the everyday activities, engagements, and memories of the diverse actors in the district. As per the famous Ottoman-Turkish saying often recollected by the interlocutors from the field, "The spirit of a space is determined by the people who inhabit there" (*Şerefu'l mekân bi'l mekin*).

73. Laurajane Smith, "Heritage, the Power of the Past, and the Politics of (Mis)recognition," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 52 (2022): 626.

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