INTERVIEW WITH AYŞEGÜL İLDENİZ: US & TURKEY IN THE REALM OF TECHNOLOGY

In this interview with TPQ, Ayşegül İldeniz shares her journey from Istanbul to Silicon Valley, and explains how her career in the digital industry evolved. İldeniz expands on the variances between Turkish and American cultures, both on a professional and personal level, and explains how these variances complement each other. She suggests that cultivating partnerships between technology firms and academia is key to strengthening ties between Turkey and the US, while also underlining the critical role of grassroots efforts in bilateral relations. Furthermore, İldeniz highlights the importance of preparing the upcoming generation, especially female students, for the careers of the future; she notes that Turkey would experience serious economic repercussions otherwise.

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TPQ

Winter 2019/20

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You are one of the leading figures in the Turkish-American business world. How did you start out your journey? Could you tell us about your story from Istanbul to San Francisco?

I worked at Intel Corporation, a prominent US technology provider, for a number of years based out of Istanbul; first as the Country Manager for Turkey, then as the Regional Director for the Middle East and Africa and an EMEA board member. Until 2013, my mission in the region had been to expand the use of technology for the 67 countries I was responsible for, which consisted of working with the business community, students and teachers, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and international bodies. I also actively participated in a policy-making and innovation thrust for emerging markets through my work at G20/B20s, the OECD business council, the World Economic Forum, and other civil society organizations in Turkey, which has always been my passion. In these NGOs and councils, I specifically contributed to policies that revolved around achieving economic progress in emerging markets through technology, supporting innovation in education systems and in Small Medium Businesses (SMBs), as well as cultivating an innovative culture in emerging markets.

During my tenure, I ran several innovative programs in Turkey, the Middle East, and Africa. To give a few examples, some of these programs included instructing four million teachers on how to utilize technology in education, encouraging innovation training in the leading universities of the 67 countries I was running, and supporting research and development efforts around education technologies. After some of these programs became global, I was promoted to lead the newly formed New Devices Group as Global Vice President at Intel headquarters in 2013. While in Silicon Valley, I worked on a consumer Internet of Things (IOT) roadmap as well as products and partnerships for Intel. Afterwards, in 2016, I became the COO of a public smart energies/smart cities company, Silver Springs Network Inc. (SSNI), that had 26 million customers around the world. My role there consisted of helping customers expand into the smart cities and IOT businesses. During my time in the United States, I joined the American Turkish Society and Turkish Philanthropy Funds, which are civic organizations that support the Turkish-American community. Currently, besides being a board member of these organizations, I also chair the TUSIAD Silicon Valley Network.

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Being an active figure in Turkish-American civil society and the business world, you must have had first-hand experience observing Turkish and American cultural variances over the years. Could you identify certain cultural differences and explain how you think these affect, as well as contribute to, business relations? From a personal perspective, what are some of the challenges you've faced that has morphed into wisdom today?

Having travelled to more than a hundred countries around the world and done business in over 50 countries, what I learned over the years is that we, as humans, are very similar in so many ways that our cultural differences can only be accentuated via caricaturizations and/or extreme characterizations. Therefore, my characterizations of similarities and differences here will be flawed at best, but I shall try. Both Turkish and American cultures care deeply about family, society, and their respective heritages. Because of this, there is a deep pride and love for their country, its history, and traditions. Both countries have a deep work ethic, moved by the fundamental belief that you can succeed and prosper through hard work, well-grounded values, and trust. In the US, interactions are more direct and reliant on the written word; business and results are foremost the obvious goal. In Turkey, relationships and the context are more important than the written word. Heritage and trust play a larger role, but ultimately, of course, the results are what matters. In the US, external circumstances are more predictable, and up to a certain extent, more controllable; whereas in Turkey, being more of an emerging market, circumstances can be unpredictable. Therefore, Turkey is more resilient to external pressures and unexpected situations. In that sense, having grown up in Turkey, I was embedded with resiliency, the ability to deal with difficult circumstances, and knowledge of the contextual culture of traditions. Later on, through working in American companies, I developed the punctuality, precision, and strategic thinking discipline that are vital aspects of more predictable, highly stable, and organized environments.

Being in Silicon Valley is almost a great combination of both worlds where the unknowns are extreme and risk-taking is very high. You need all the resilience, ability to act under high pressure, high discipline, strategic chops, and almost always a roadmap to adhere to. I think the Turkish and American business communities have

a lot to learn from each other, and should strive to create numerous win-win scenarios to prosper as two economies.

As someone who serves on the board of various Turkish-American organizations, what do you think the Turkish tech industry can do to increase its presence in Silicon Valley? What can be done to strengthen cross-cultural ties between Turkey and the US?

In Silicon Valley, various cultural heritages have their own strong networks supported by organizations and governments to build businesses as well as cultural links, such as the German, Korean, and Portuguese business networks. They largely concentrate on a few areas: networking, supporting careers and business dealings by collaboration, establishing a presence in Silicon Valley for business and social causes, supporting local start-ups back home who want to find opportunities in Silicon Valley, and acting as a conduit between their local business society and Silicon Valley communities.

Today I lead TUSIAD's Silicon Valley Network in the Bay Area. We have a network of over 300 business people of Turkish descent who are all highly accomplished in their respective areas of work. We are a very young community, only two years old, and are entirely made up of volunteers with support from the TUSIAD Secretariat in Istanbul. We have organized several panels and events in San Francisco and the wider Bay Area with prominent American and Turkish entrepreneurs and businesspeople on supporting startups and professionals who work on the West Coast of the United States. I have observed that there are a number of very accomplished and enthusiastic individuals of Turkish descent who want not only to give back to Turkey, but also tell their own stories as Turks in America. Business is a great tool for the two communities to get to know each other and build ties.

I also think arts and culture is another fantastic tool to show people that they are much more similar than different. I serve on the boards of American Turkish Society (ATS) and Turkish Philanthropy Funds (TPF). The legendary Ahmet Ertegün, who started ATS and served on its board for more than 30 years, was a shining example of how accomplished Turks in the US can bring Turkish and American cultures together. Today ATS gives scholarships to young artists and scholars who demonstrate excellence in arts and culture, holds a Turkish film festival in New York that showcases the best of Turkish cinema to New York audiences, and organizes an annual event to celebrate the success of prominent businesspeople of Turkish heritage and their contributions to the Turkish and American communities.

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The other organization that I am a board member of is the Turkish Philanthropy Funds (TPF), which is the leading US community foundation for high-impact social investments dedicated to Turkish and Turkish-American communities. Since 2007, TPF has mobilized over 35 million dollars, and has invested over 20 million dollars in grants with partners focused on addressing economic, social, and environmental issues in Turkey and around the world. By providing support to realize the philanthropic visions of individuals, families, and corporations, TPF donors and partners have reached thousands of families and directly funded over 200 projects. Efforts like these from the grassroots of the Turkish community in the US, that includes bankers, investors, university professors, retired alumni, and tech professionals like myself, will help continue to show that the ties between the US and Turkey are not only deep-rooted but have the potential to prosper even further.

How do you view Turkey's situation within the digital and high tech realm? In which areas can Turkey take example from the US and global models in improving its industry?

Turkey has been ranked 49th in the global innovation index in 2019.[1] We have been hovering around this level over the last two decades. There are a few countries like China, Singapore, the UAE who have made pretty steady moves in the index, while the well-known ones in the industry, such as Switzerland, the US, and Korea, have maintained their top ratings. China particularly has ramped up in technologies like artificial intelligence and quantum computing, which points to a multipolar rather than unipolar world going forward, defined by more than just US domination of technological advancement. I assume privacy and the data arms race will be one of the strongest aspects shaping the next decade, therefore, all countries will have to take a position and have a well-established framework, technological tools, and policies on this issue.

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[1] "Global Innovation Index 2019: Creating Healthy Lives—The Future of Medical Innovation," *Cornell University, INSEAD, and the World Intellectual Property Organization*, 2019, https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_gii_2019.pdf

The use of technology and its application to everyday life in Turkey has kept up with the rest of the world—if anything, we are some of the most ardent users of social media in the world. It is rather in the use of technology in business for efficiency gains and production of technology and intellectual property is where I believe we need to make some strides. The global formula for making headway in the innovation index, thereby exporting technology and intellectual property, has long been described as having a vibrant entrepreneurial environment combined with creative thinking that would draw support from investors, strong IP laws that drive new technologies and protect founders, and an able and willing business community clustered around certain sectors competing aggressively in the world with international products and brands. Strong universities, academia, and research ties with the business world, a consistent roadmap by the government, backed by several programs to protect and support IP and research, and a good education system that fosters free thinking and analytical skills in students for a future career in the digital world are also all vital.

In order to be prepared for the next decade, the time to act is now. We need a long-term strategic plan that touches on all these aspects through one consistent approach. I believe we have tried all of the ingredients, and have the necessary tools and enthusiasm, but we will need a plan to prioritize and pull it together. There are several startups and venture capital firms (VCs), government-backed seed funds and offices, as well as world-renowned scholars and schools in Turkey. We would need to establish stronger partnerships between global tech hubs and universities, support and establish internationally-founded laboratories and research institutes, as well as export and import scholars, employees, and startup founders to cross-pollinate. I do see very accomplished founders who have moved to Silicon Valley but still use Turkey as a base to develop technology in an affordable way, due to Turkey's skilled workforce of software engineers. This could be a starting model to support and help develop engineering talent inside the country.

As a prominent female leader, how do you think female representation can be increased in the digital industry? How do you compare women's engagement with the industry in Turkey and the US? Following up, how would you evaluate the digital industry overall in terms of diversity and inclusiveness? In what ways can women in STEM be supported?

The tech industry is an interesting case for diversity and inclusiveness. The Silicon Valley culture that has been led by engineers has traditionally been male-dominated. From a heritage perspective though, there are people from all over the world representing more than a hundred nationalities, all largely driven by success, intellect, and entrepreneurial spirit. It is common to see companies led and formed by nation-

alities other than North Americans in the Valley. In the past decade, as more women have been entering the engineering and technology fields, there has been a slow but certain shift with more women board members, entrepreneurs, executives, venture capitalists, and engineers.

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Diversity programs in tech companies are the norm now. These programs focus on equal pay tracking, equal promotions, reward programs, and education and mentorship activities. They also focus largely on hiring diverse candidates. Large technology companies like Google, Facebook, and Intel have taken up specific goals and started reporting on their diversity numbers. According to the Harvard Business Review,[2] data shows that when companies form diverse task forces, diverse employees increase by between nine percent and 30 percent. For example, Deloitte managed to increase its women partners globally from five percent to 21 percent with a very concerted effort on diversity. I think all these programs help, but women still need support in other aspects, like flexible hour schedules and child care support, to be able to maintain their family lives alongside successful careers. Encouraging more women to go into STEM subjects in universities is a cultural shift that needs to be supported across society, starting with families. Governmental and non-governmental institutions need to help promote the message that a woman can indeed be a very successful engineer, a data scientist, a researcher, or a technology leader. This is an economic problem especially for emerging countries like Turkey, where we need all 100 percent of our young people to be educated for the jobs of the future.

When I look at the Turkish case for female representation in the tech industry, at the executive level, I think we are better positioned compared to the previous decade. There are several women leaders who lead international technology companies in Turkey today, compared to only one or two in the previous decade. I call that a big jump. In the meantime, the number of women in universities who choose to study engineering as well as the number of women who graduate from excellent schools

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[2] "Building a Diverse Organization," *Harvard Business Review*, July/August 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail

but choose not to start a career has unfortunately not been increasing. To compare, while women's workforce participation in the US is 56 percent, the rate is 33 percent in Turkey.[3] We still have the lowest women's participation in the labor force among OECD countries.[4] So my belief is that, this is not just a STEM issue, but rather a wider cultural phenomenon that we need collective action on if we are to make a change. Ultimately, if we have a larger part of our society not participating in value creation and economic development, this creates economic consequences, which in turn directly impacts Turkey's GDP growth.

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[3] The World Bank, "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)," September 2019, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS

[4] OECD, "Employment: Labour force participation rate by sex and age group," https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?query-id=54741