



MARCH  
2024

# "A Capital City Will Always Be a Capital City"

## The Rise of Konya under AKP Rule

Élisa DOMINGUES DOS SANTOS  
Jules LIAUD  
Dorothee SCHMID



The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit foundation according to the decree of November 16, 2022. As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the authors alone.

ISBN: 979-10-373-0867-2

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2024

Cover: © IKOSTOCK/Shutterstock.com

**How to quote this publication:**

Élisa Domingues Dos Santos, Jules Liaud and Dorothée Schmid,  
“A Capital City Will Always Be a Capital City’. The Rise of Konya under AKP Rule”,  
*Ifri Studies*, Ifri, March 2024.

**Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Phone: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

E-mail: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

# Authors

**Élisa Domingues dos Santos** is a researcher on Ifri's Turkey/Middle East Program and its Sub-Saharan Africa Center. She holds a doctorate in political science from the Université catholique de Lille and is attached to the C3RD and ETHICS research groups. She is also an associate researcher at the Institut Français des Études Anatoliennes (Ifea) in Istanbul. Her research focuses on relations between Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Jules Liaud** was a research assistant with Ifri's Turkey/Middle East Program between February and July 2023. After completing a double degree in history and political science at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, he obtained a master's degree in international relations, specializing in the history of political trends in contemporary Turkey.

**Dorothee Schmid** heads Ifri's Turkey/Middle East Program. She holds a doctorate in political science from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and is a graduate of Sciences-Po Paris. Dorothee Schmid launched Ifri's "Contemporary Turkey" Program in 2008 before taking over as head of the Institute's Middle East Program.

# Résumé

Les élections législative et présidentielle de mai 2023 s'annonçaient comme une épreuve pour le Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) en perte de vitesse; le parti islamo-conservateur s'est pourtant maintenu aux affaires, démontrant son ancrage remarquable dans le paysage turc. Il a notamment enregistré l'un de ses meilleurs scores à Konya, confirmant le soutien massif et ininterrompu de cette ville centre-anatolienne de deux millions d'habitants à l'islam politique turc. Ce phénomène s'explique par les bénéfices que Konya tire de cette relation depuis plusieurs décennies. Longtemps marginalisée dans un espace provincial peu connecté aux centres de pouvoir, Konya, ville réputée pour son histoire et son patrimoine religieux, est devenue avec l'AKP un « tigre anatolien ». Le développement économique de la province s'est appuyé sur une base productive agricole (grenier à céréales de la Turquie) qui a permis l'émergence d'une agro-industrie locale, portée par des petites et moyennes entreprises dynamiques, combinant valeurs conservatrices et efficacité entrepreneuriale. Tissant des liens privilégiés avec l'AKP, Konya a bénéficié des politiques de développement territorial qui ont hâté son désenclavement. Identité anatolienne, géographie centrale, variété des circulations humaines et ouverture sur des marchés de plus en plus lointains (Afrique) font aujourd'hui de Konya une vitrine de la modernité paradoxale de la nouvelle Turquie.

## Executive summary

Although the May 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections looked set to be a difficult test for the flagging Islamo-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), the latter eventually held on to power, demonstrating their remarkable resilience in the Turkish context. The party notably recorded one of its best electoral results in Konya, thus reaffirming the massive and uninterrupted support for Turkish political Islam of this Central Anatolian city of two million inhabitants. This phenomenon can be explained by the benefits that Konya has derived from its relationship with the Islamic movement over several decades. Whereas Konya, a city renowned for its history and religious heritage, had long been marginalized as an unimportant province owing to its limited connections to western Turkey's centers of power, it became an "Anatolian tiger" under AKP rule. The province's economic development started from an agricultural base (it was known as Turkey's "breadbasket"), which enabled the emergence of local agro-industry. It has been driven by dynamic small and medium-sized enterprises, which combine conservative values with entrepreneurial efficiency. Forging close ties with the AKP, Konya has benefited from territorial development policies that have facilitated its rapid opening to the world. Thanks to its Anatolian identity, central location, diversity of human flows and capacity to project its economic dynamism into increasingly distant markets (such as those in Africa), Konya has become a showcase for the paradoxical modernity of the new Turkey.

# Table of contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>FROM RURAL IDYLL TO INDUSTRIAL CENTER: METAMORPHOSIS OF A CONSERVATIVE TOWN.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>A unique cultural and religious heritage .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The emergence of an agro-industrial city.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>KONYA'S MODERNITY: A SHOWCASE CITY FOR THE AKP .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>The cradle of Anatolia's "Silent Revolution" .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Industrial rebalancing... ..</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>... and political upheaval .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>Konya at the heart of AKP networks.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>The circulation of local economic elites.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Higher education in party hands.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<b>"CENTRAL CITY OF THE CENTRAL COUNTRY" .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Konya, the city of choice for the planned opening-up     of Central Anatolia.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Human movement: a city anchored to the East and South.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>Historic waves of settlement .....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>A national and international tourist destination .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Student mobility open to the East .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<b>An outward-looking industrial basin.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>31</b>

# Introduction

“A capital city will always be a capital city.”<sup>1</sup>

In the presidential election of May 2023, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan obtained one of his best electoral results in the province of Konya, where he secured 73% of the vote in the second round while also increasing the total number of votes received compared with the 2018 elections (including in the first round).<sup>2</sup> This result testifies to the local population’s massive support for the government and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), even at a time when the president found himself in a run-off at the national level for the first time, against a backdrop of mismanagement of the terrible earthquake of February 2023 and a runaway economic crisis. Few analysts predicted such a strong result for the AKP, which was widely predicted to see a decline in support, even in its strongholds. However, in Konya, the seats lost by Erdoğan’s party in the parliamentary elections went over to its ultranationalist ally, the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP); in other words, the result did not represent any progress for the opposition.

To gain a deeper understanding of the local anchoring of support for the AKP and its allies, Ifri’s Turkey/Middle East Program visited the city of Konya in May 2023, at the time of the dual presidential and legislative elections: the aim was to meet representatives of the city’s economic sector and political actors in the run-up to the elections, in order to understand the specific features of this dynamic. In the present study, the findings of that research are supplemented by the observations made during a second visit in the wake of the elections. It aims to understand the reasons for the AKP’s uninterrupted success in a province that has been loyal to it through thick and thin for decades, that of Konya, a remote city in Central Anatolia (İç Anadolu), which has been less studied than other major cities such as Istanbul or Ankara. Yet Konya has one of the highest populations of Turkey’s provinces: with 2,300,000 inhabitants, it is ranked sixth, behind Antalya and ahead of Adana. It is also Turkey’s largest province in terms of land, with an area comparable to that of Switzerland or the Netherlands (41,000 km<sup>2</sup>).

The importance of political Islam in Konya, which is key to the AKP’s recent success, is nothing new. As far back as 1969, the province elected as an MP Necmettin Erbakan – the founder of Turkish Islamism, Erdoğan’s mentor

---

1. Quote from an interview with the President of the Konya Chamber of Commerce in December 2023.

2. “Konya seçim sonuçları”, *Sözcü*, available at: [www.secim.sozcu.com](http://www.secim.sozcu.com).

and the first of Turkey's Islamist prime ministers (1996-1997) – and since 1989, the city's metropolitan mayoralty has remained in the hands of the dominant Islamist party of the day (*Refah*, then *Fazilet*, and finally the AKP since 2002). This success can be explained partly by the social make-up of the city, which is known as one of the most conservative in Turkey, but also by the alliance at the local level between successful entrepreneurs (the "Anatolian tigers") and Islamist political formations:<sup>3</sup> the latter recruit among the managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and, once in power, use the resources conferred by the municipal institution to serve the business interests of those managers. To ensure that they remain in power, municipal teams also direct social policies to benefit clientelist networks.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Élise Massicard has shown that, for Islamist parties, the local level constitutes a stepping stone to national institutional positions, notably through the acquisition of managerial legitimacy and the training of professionalized staff.<sup>5</sup> These mutual support arrangements are the precondition for an economic and social metamorphosis that underpins the AKP's broad and solid base. Mirroring Turkey's tremendous economic growth of the 2000s, Konya has been completely transformed over the last two decades. The city is now a showcase for the AKP's development model, a unique synthesis of economic modernity and social conservatism. Konya is also the hometown and former parliamentary seat (for seven years, 2011-2018) of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the historic, albeit understated, figurehead of the AKP method. Until his disgrace in 2016, Davutoğlu was a key figure in Erdoğan's Turkey, an AKP grandee, Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014), then Prime Minister (2014-2016).

In the present study, we first chart the genesis of this particular success story by looking at the conservative roots of Konya, a rural town that built on its agricultural potential to become Turkey's breadbasket. Next, we examine the reasons behind Konya's integration into Turkey's power networks, which led to its metamorphosis into a model of AKP-style modernity. Finally, we look at Konya's rise, describing how the leap in connectivity of this Anatolian city has linked it to the rest of Turkey and opened it up to the world.

---

3. M.-V. Robert, "Le Tesbih et l'iPhone: islam politique et libéralisme en Turquie", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 82, No. 1, Ifri, 2017, pp. 117-127, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

4. C. Ark, "Dynamiques clientélares et transformation urbaine à Istanbul", *Pôle Sud*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2015, pp. 29-42, available at: [www.cairn.info](http://www.cairn.info).

5. É. Massicard, "L'islamisme turc à l'épreuve du pouvoir municipal. Production d'espaces, pratiques de gouvernement et gestion des sociétés locales", *Critique internationale*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2009, pp. 21-38, available at: [www.cairn.info](http://www.cairn.info).

# From rural idyll to industrial center: metamorphosis of a conservative town

Historically a rural and agricultural town, Konya began its transition to industry in the 1950s, eventually becoming one of Turkey's major industrial centers. Throughout this metamorphosis, one thing has remained constant: the area's religious and conservative identity, which has made it the cradle of Turkish political Islam and a stronghold of the AKP.

## A unique cultural and religious heritage

Located in the great plains of Central Anatolia, Konya is a very ancient city whose earliest traces date back to the Copper Age. Known in the Classical era by the Latin name of Iconium, it experienced a major turning point with the defeat of the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071: the beginning of the Seljuk conquest of Anatolia led to the foundation of the first Turkish state in the region in 1077, the Sultanate of Rum, which became known as the Sultanate of Konya when the city became its capital in 1097. Konya retained its status as the capital of the small Turkish states that succeeded the Seljuk Sultanate after the latter's disintegration. The city finally lost this pre-eminence when it was conquered in 1468 by the Ottomans since the beating heart of this rising empire was located in Western Anatolia and Balkan Europe.

Konya reached its apogee in the thirteenth century. It was at this time that Konya established its proud reputation as a city of history and religion, which remains to this day. The city conserves the memory of the first great Anatolian Turkish state, which is physically manifested in the sumptuous mosques and schools (*medrese*) that dot its landscape. These monuments, with their distinctive Anatolian Seljuk architectural style – notably including the Alâeddin Mosque, which houses the tombs of the sultans of the Seljuk dynasty – now attract millions of tourists (3.6 million for all the city's museums in 2022).<sup>6</sup> The city's glorious past is also reflected in its place names: not only that of Konya's largest district (*Selçuklu*) but also its largest university (Selçuk Üniversitesi) and even the *Selçuklu* high-speed train station, which opened in 2020.

---

6. M. Balivet, H. Lessan-Pezzechki and R. Mounier, "Les Seldjoukides de Rûm", in M. Balivet, H. Lessan-Pezzechki and R. Mounier (eds.), *Les Turcs seldjoukides d'Anatolie. XI<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Volume 1: Les sources persanes Ibn Bibi. Une anthologie des sources premières*, Aix-en-Provence : Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017, available at: [www.books.openedition.org](http://www.books.openedition.org).

The Seljuk period also saw the city develop a religious importance that has been preserved to this day. It was in Konya that the Persian mystic and poet Djalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî settled (commonly known as *Mevlâna* in Turkish and Rumi in English); not long after his death in 1273, his followers established the Mevlevi order, a Sufi order whose members are known as "whirling dervishes". At the same time, a mausoleum was built to house his remains. A *tekke* – a kind of monastery for dervishes – was later added to the tombs, which transformed the site into the central location for that *tariqa*.<sup>7 8</sup> The building, featuring a magnificent green earthenware dome, has become the symbol of the city and was transformed into a museum when the Republic of Turkey was founded in the 1920s. Today, the *Mevlâna* is the most visited monument in the whole country, with 3.3 million visitors in 2022, more than the *Topkapı* Palace in Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> Tourist visitors rub shoulders with thousands of pilgrims who travel to the site.

The legacy of the Mevlevi in the city is also perpetuated through regular events throughout the year, such as the *Mistik Müzik Festivali* (Sufi Music Festival) in September, and especially the *Şeb-i Arûs* (Wedding Night) festival, which takes place over the two weeks preceding December 17, the date of Rumi's death. The festivities are marked by numerous religious ceremonies throughout the city, including the famous ritual of the *sema*, the spinning dance of the whirling dervishes. These events, organized by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, are now more tourist attractions than religious ceremonies. *Semas* and other Sufi rituals have long been forced underground by the state, following the dissolution of the *tariqa* in 1925 by Mustafa Kemal, who saw them as reactionary structures hindering his project to secularize the country.<sup>10</sup> Although they are still officially banned, Sufi orders have, in fact, reappeared with the accession to power of governments that are less hostile to religion, including, most recently, the AKP.<sup>11</sup>

Situated far from the great cosmopolitan centers of the Ottoman Empire and with its rich religious heritage, Konya earned a solid reputation as a pious city. While it was marginalized in the construction of the Kemalist Republic and was excluded from the redistribution networks that were reserved for the

7. "*Tariqa*" literally means "way" in Arabic. It is often translated as either "brotherhood" or "mystical order," and designates the more or less institutionalized group formed by the disciples of a religious master (*sheikh*) who became such by revealing to his followers a new path (*tariqa*) toward God.

8. A. Akyürek, "La Néo-Mevleviye ou l'émergence d'un confrérisme à la confluence du soufisme et du New Age en Turquie contemporaine", doctoral dissertation in Sociology, under the supervision of Thierry Zarcone, École doctorale de l'École pratique des hautes études, Paris, May 5, 2021, p. 6, available at: [www.theses.hal.science](http://www.theses.hal.science).

9. "Konya'da ki müzeleri 2022'de kaç milyon kişi ziyaret etti? Bakanlık il il açıkladı" [How many million people visited Konya's museums in 2022? Ministry announces annual figures], *Konya Bakış*, March 2, 2023, available at: [www.konyabakis.com](http://www.konyabakis.com).

10. Y. Paçaloğlu, "To Pluck A Rose from Gáf and Lám: On the Dissolution of the Dervish Lodges in Turkey", master's thesis in Religious Studies, under the supervision of Aun Hasan Ali, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, 2019, available at: [www.scholar.colorado.edu](http://www.scholar.colorado.edu).

11. C. Pierre-Magnani, "À Konya, cerceau du soufisme turc, des milliers de croyants et de curieux", *La Croix*, December 20, 2023, available at: [www.la-croix.com](http://www.la-croix.com).

west of the country, it became the bastion of Turkish political Islam, which emerged there in the 1960s. A founding figure of this movement, Necmettin Erbakan, successfully ran for parliament for the first time in Konya (although he was originally from the Black Sea) in 1969, one year before founding the first Islamist party in the history of the Turkish Republic, the National Order Party (*Millî Nizam Partisi* – MNP). He was subsequently re-elected MP in Konya four times until 1995, a year before he became Prime Minister, which was the first time an Islamist activist reached this position in the political system of republican Turkey. It was also in Konya that Erbakan organized a large rally for the liberation of Jerusalem in September 1980, during which the national anthem was booed, and calls were made for the establishment of an Islamic state. These events culminated in the military coup of September 12, 1980. Finally, Konya was Turkey's first major city to be ruled by Islamists, following the victory of the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi* – RP) in the 1989 local elections and the election of Halil Ürün as metropolitan mayor. Halil Ürün helped found the AKP in 2001 and was elected MP for the city as an AKP candidate at the time of the party's historic election victory in November 2002. Since then, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party has reigned unchallenged in the city, again securing over 70% of the vote in the 2019 local elections.<sup>12</sup>

Konya can accurately be described as the cradle of Turkish Islamism, both in terms of its historical and religious heritage and in terms of its political practice. Mustafa Kamalak, Erbakan's successor and chairman of the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) from 2011 to 2016, summed up this state of mind in 2013: in his view, the salvation of the Muslim World in its confrontation with the West will begin from "Konya, the home of the Saints", adding that it is one of the cities "that can best understand the *Millî Görüş*".<sup>13</sup>

## The emergence of an agro-industrial city

Thanks to its vast size, flat topography and ideal climatic and soil conditions, the province of Konya accounts for a tenth of Turkey's arable land and is without doubt the country's agricultural heartland. Two-thirds of the province's surface area is dedicated to agriculture, representing 8.3% of Turkey's total cultivated land. Production is mainly made up of field crops: wheat, barley, sugar beet, beans, potatoes, sunflowers and poppies. Over 4 million tonnes of cereals are produced here every year, including 1.6 million tonnes of wheat, representing around 10% of national

12. "31 Mart 2019 Konya Yerel Seçim Sonuçları" [The results of the March 31, 2019 local elections in Konya], *Sözcü Gazetesi*, available at: [www.secim2019.sozcu.com](http://www.secim2019.sozcu.com).

13. "*Millî Görüş*," meaning "national vision," is the name given to the Islamist ideology developed by Erbakan from the 1960s onward, which advocates a vision of Turkey's development in harmony with its Muslim values. See Y. Uyarci, "Les dynamiques des PME en Turquie: structuration et développement régional étudiés à partir de la confédération TUSKON", doctoral dissertation in Economics and Finance and Sociology, under the supervision of Stéphane de Tapia, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, 2014, p. 334, available at: [www.theses.hal.science](http://www.theses.hal.science).

production. This contributes to the province's dominant position in national flour production (17% of the total), which is largely export-oriented: Turkey is the world's leading exporter of flour, sharing half the global market with Kazakhstan.<sup>14</sup> The province also accounts for 30% of the country's sugar beet production and 70% of its carrot production and is also the leading producer of salt, thanks to the great salt desert that lies there, *Tuz Gölü* (literally "salt lake"). Finally, Konya is first in the country in terms of cattle breeding (930,000 head) and second for goats, sheep and poultry. It is also the leading producer of milk.<sup>15</sup>

This clearly demonstrates the province's fundamental importance to the country's agriculture. Building on its agricultural base, Konya began its transition to industry in the 1950s, starting with the agri-food sector. The first major agricultural modernization plan, financed by American Marshall Plan subsidies in the 1950s, enabled the province to become Turkey's breadbasket – from 1948 onward, it received the third-highest number of American tractors after the provinces of Adana and Aydın.<sup>16</sup> Modern factories were also set up there, with a focus on basic products such as sugar, as part of the Kemalist strategy of national self-sufficiency (import substitution industrialization).<sup>17</sup> The rapid mechanization of agriculture, combined with population growth, contributed to a rural exodus: while the countryside was slowly being depopulated, the province's cities (Konya, Akşehir, Ereğli) experienced strong demographic growth.

Today, the city of Konya is particularly specialized in metallurgy: it accounts for 45% of Turkey's metallurgical production, which enables it to supply spare parts for almost the entire manufacturing chain of tractors and other agricultural machinery. As a result, it represents two-thirds of national production and 45% of exports of agricultural equipment.<sup>18</sup> Konya is also a major center of the Turkish automotive industry, producing over 70% of spare parts for numerous car models, mainly for foreign brands established in the country and for export. This specialization began in the 1970s, notably with the launch of Tümosan, the Turkish Automobile Industry and Trade Company. Founded in Konya in 1975 by Necmettin Erbakan, the state-owned company specialized in the manufacture of Fiat-licensed tractors and engines until 1988. It was later privatized by the AKP in 2004 and sold to Albayrak Holding, a large conglomerate founded by a

---

14. O. Vialle-Guerin, "La Turquie, un poids lourd dans la transformation du blé", *Perspectives agricoles*, April 2, 2021, available at: [www.perspectives-agricoles.com](http://www.perspectives-agricoles.com).

15. All these figures are available on the Konya Chamber of Commerce website: "A Rising Economy. Konya", Konya Ticaret Odası, available at [www.kto.org](http://www.kto.org).

16. M. H. Özer, "The Effects of the Marshall Plan Aids to the Development of the Agricultural Sector in Turkey, the 1948-1953 Period", *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2014, pp. 427-439.

17. M. Bazin and S. De Tapia, "L'industrialisation de la Turquie: processus de développement et dynamiques spatiales", *Méditerranées*, No. 3-4, 1997, available at: [www.persee.fr](http://www.persee.fr).

18. "A Rising Economy. Konya", *op. cit.*

close associate of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>19</sup> Konya also has a strong presence in shoe manufacturing, with over 10,000 people working in the sector and producing over 15 million pairs each year, according to Muhammet Acar, president of the Konya Chamber of Shoemakers (*Konya Ayakkabıcılar Odası*), the city accounts for 40% of shoe production in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the region has also become a hub for the Turkish defense industry, with 517 of the 822 companies in the sector based there.<sup>21</sup> This dominant position has been acquired gradually through increases in scale, as explained by the head of external relations for the AKP's provincial branch, who points to the example of factories that used to produce firearms for hunting but now produce weapons of war.<sup>22</sup>

\*\*\*

While remaining the agricultural heart of Turkey, Konya has thus become the country's eighth-largest industrial hub, behind Istanbul, Kocaeli, Bursa, Ankara, Izmir, Gaziantep and Adana. Konya's companies are leaders in many fields, including agribusiness, transport and defense. Konya's remarkable industrialization, made possible both by its topographical and climatic features and by the liberalization of the Turkish economy that began in the 1980s, is also the result of the emergence of a distinctly Anatolian form of capitalism, combining conservative religious values with entrepreneurial spirit. In addition to paving the way for an economic revolution, this phenomenon has also contributed to a major political shift in Turkey.

---

19. Tümosan website, "About us" then "History", available at: [www.tumosan.com](http://www.tumosan.com).

20. "Ayakkabıda Konya farkı" [Konya makes a difference in shoes], *Yeniğün Konya*, February 17, 2022, available at: [www.konyayenigun.com](http://www.konyayenigun.com).

21. Website of "Invest in Konya" (Konya Yatırım Destek Ofisi), "Sectors" then "Defense Industry", available at: [www.investinkonya.gov.tr](http://www.investinkonya.gov.tr).

22. Interview conducted on May 13, 2023 at the AKP provincial branch headquarters in Konya.

# Konya's modernity: a showcase city for the AKP

Konya's integration into the entrepreneurial, export-oriented economy of present-day Turkey exemplifies a form of modernity advocated by the AKP, which combines growth with conservative values. The city and its province shed light on the trajectory of a conservative, religious Turkey, which has succeeded in reversing the balance of power with a secular, Westernized, Kemalist Turkey in the urban west. As a bastion of this "silent revolution,"<sup>23</sup> Konya quietly occupies a central position in the AKP's power networks.

## The cradle of Anatolia's "Silent Revolution"

Until the 1990s, economic development in Turkey was unevenly distributed across its territory, with a strong asymmetry between a dynamic west and a sluggish east. Industrialization and economic liberalization from the 1980s onward gradually succeeded in bringing the country back together. This process was facilitated by the work of private economic actors who helped rebalance the industrial base toward Central Anatolia; the emergence of these actors as a conservative bourgeoisie also led to political upheaval on a national scale.

### ***Industrial rebalancing...***

Konya is one of the cradles of the new conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie, created by economic liberalization and the shift from an import-substitution strategy to an export-oriented economy.

This shift was largely due to Turgut Özal, who held high office in Turkey for a decade, first as Prime Minister (1983-1989) then as President (1989-1993). Özal was born into a provincial family of Kurdish Zaza origin,<sup>24</sup> close to the same Sufi brotherhood as Necmettin Erbakan, the *Naqshbandiyya*,<sup>25</sup> and was openly religious. As such, he was favored by the "Black Turks" – the

---

23. M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

24. G. Dorransoro, "Les Kurdes de Turquie: revendications identitaires, espace national et globalisation", *Les Études du CERI*, No. 62, January 2000, p. 12.

25. U. Manço, "Sécularisation de l'islam en Turquie", *La Revue nouvelle*, January 2009, available at: [www.revuenouvelle.be](http://www.revuenouvelle.be).

conservative majority in central and eastern Anatolia<sup>26</sup> – and set about bringing the country into line with their needs and aspirations. While softening the strict secularism that had been demanded by the army since the 1980 coup, he also granted aid to SMEs to support their export competitiveness and liberalize the economy. It was under his rule that the “Anatolian tigers” (an expression modeled on that of the “Asian tigers”) emerged, the Turkish SMEs that set out to conquer world markets, driving the country’s growth from the 1990s onward. Marcel Bazin and Stéphane de Tapia have accurately described these small industrialists as actors who “acquired economic know-how from trading agricultural products and satisfying the basic needs of an Anatolian clientele who were just emerging from rural life”.<sup>27</sup> They benefited not only from a new policy of state support but also from the country’s economic stabilization following the balance-of-payments crisis and the hyperinflation of the late 1970s and early 1980s and from closer trade ties with the European Union (EU), following the establishment of the Customs Union in 1995. After long being marginalized in favor of the great industrial basins of the west of the country (Istanbul, Izmit, Ankara, Izmir), the region of Central and Eastern Anatolia now shares in the exceptional economic performance achieved by Turkey in the 2000s – the country increased its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita threefold in the space of a decade<sup>28</sup> – while also benefitting from the consequences of that growth.

---

26. The expression “Black Turks” (*siyah Türkler*) is opposed to “White Turks” (*beyaz Türkler*) and can be seen as a categorization based on a perception that “Turks have of themselves”. The term was coined by journalist Ufuk Güldemir in the 1990s, after Turgut Özal came to power and a section of the population, the “White Turks”, came to detest him for what he was and, above all, for what he represented. Whereas the “White Turks” are urban, cultured and well-to-do, with a Westernized lifestyle, the “Black Turks” are either rural or recent city-dwellers, either poor or nouveau riche, and have a more traditional, “Oriental” lifestyle. See M. Bazin and S. De Tapia, “Chapter 6 – Une ouverture vers des horizons variés”, in M. Bazin (ed.), *La Turquie. Géographie d’une puissance émergente*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2012, pp. 257-294.

27. M. Bazin and S. De Tapia, “L’industrialisation de la Turquie: processus de développement et dynamiques spatiales”, in Marcel Bazin (ed.), *La Turquie. Géographie d’une puissance émergente*, op. cit.

28. J.-C. Vérez, “La Turquie: une future puissance économique mondiale?” *L’Europe en formation*, No. 367, 2013/1, pp. 93-107, available at: [www.cairn.info](http://www.cairn.info).

### Entrepreneurial Dynamism in Konya

Konya's reputation for entrepreneurial dynamism is justified. The province is well known in Turkey for the high number of companies it hosts relative to its size: it is home to 138,163 of the 3,773,000 SMEs operating throughout the country (Istanbul holds first place with 1,144,953).<sup>29</sup> In 2021, 3,198 new companies were registered with the local Chamber of Commerce, compared with 1,917 in 2010. The vast majority of these are SMEs, although Konya is also home to major Turkish firms such as Aselsan (defense), Tümosan (tractors), AYD (automotive), Konya Şeker (sugar) and Panagro (agri-food). The local Bera group, better known under its former name Kombassan, is a symbol of the new Anatolian capitalism, which mimics the old capitalism with its strategies of diversification: from a small paper manufacturing SME created in 1988, it has now become a holding company with 40,000 small shareholders, operating in the retail, construction, agri-food and hotel sectors. Its headquarters are located in the heart of the city, in a huge tower topped by a dome inspired by the *Mevlâna*.

Konya's distinctive industrial structure gives it an advantage over other provinces: the presence of SMEs operating in different segments enables it to control the entire production chain for many products, such as agricultural machinery, and this versatility is also a source of flexibility. This reduces the impact of economic crises, as was the case in 2000-2001.

The "Anatolian tigers" are also distinguished socially by their family-based organization and the importance of religion, which distances them from the secular, rentier bourgeoisie of the country's cosmopolitan west, the so-called "White Turks", who inherited the privileges of the republic they served and controlled long after its foundation in 1923. The naturally conservative ecosystem of Konya, steeped in the fraternal tradition suppressed by Atatürk, is an ideal social melting pot for the new Islamic bourgeoisie that supports the AKP.

### **... and political upheaval**

In 1990, Anatolian entrepreneurs founded Müsiad (*Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği* – the Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen) to defend their interests, thereby creating a division within Turkish capitalism, which had historically been represented exclusively by the Tüsiad (*Türk Sanayicileri ve İş İnsanları Derneği* – Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen), and dominated by Western capitalism. The cooperation of these actors within an employers'

29. Y. Uyarci, "Les dynamiques des PME en Turquie: structuration et développement régional étudiés à partir de la confédération TUSKON", *op. cit.*

organization, and in the context of the proliferation of organized industrial zones<sup>30</sup> (around ten in Konya),<sup>31</sup> helped to consolidate and institutionalize Islamic capital, transforming this community of entrepreneurs into an interest group integrated into the highest spheres of the state. From the very first years after its creation in 1990, Müsiad took an interest in the city of Konya for its entrepreneurial potential right in the heart of Anatolia. However, it was not until 1993 that a Müsiad branch was finally established there (long after other towns in the region, including Kayseri), and a few years later, the Konya branch became the most active one.<sup>32</sup> Konya's reputation for strong Müsiad activity stems from its mobilization of circles closely linked to Erbakan's *Milli Görüş*.<sup>33</sup> Erbakan's short-lived accession to the post of Prime Minister in 1996-1997, as champion of the "Black Turks," marked the beginning of a political upheaval, culminating in the electoral victory of the AKP in November 2002 and the installation of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the country's leader.

From that point on, economic actors in general, and especially outward-looking leaders of SMEs, became political actors. In particular, they have benefited from the implementation of a dynamic foreign policy geared toward economic interests, which turns companies into Turkey's informal ambassadors. The new foreign policy doctrine championed by Ahmet Davutoğlu relies on economic soft power to project Turkey's influence far beyond its borders: the country has entered negotiations to join the EU, demonstrates a desire for good relations with neighboring countries, and has signed large numbers of free trade, free movement and cooperation agreements with countries in Africa (Egypt in 2005, Morocco and Tunisia in 2004) and the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> Anatolian SMEs are fully involved in this quest for "strategic depth",<sup>35</sup> which overturns Western clichés about Turkish introversion. Although these small Anatolian capitalists are poorly integrated into European markets, access to which is monopolized by companies in western Turkey, they are instead becoming the vehicle for Turkey's external economic projection toward the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Africa.

Alongside Kayseri and Adana, Konya is one of the main centers of the "Anatolian tigers": the dynamism of its SMEs, run by pious entrepreneurs, is fueled by a strong internal rural exodus (from the province's countryside to

30. D. Yankaya-Péan, *La Nouvelle bourgeoisie islamique: le modèle turc*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.

31. "Une économie montante. Konya", *op. cit.*

32. A. Dönmez, "25 Yıllın Hikayesi", [The story of 25 years], Müsiad Kültür Kitaplığı [Müsiad Culture Library], Müsiad, edited by Oğuz Özcan and Şefik Memiş, April 2015.

33. M. Çemrek, "Formation and Representation of Interests in Turkish Political Economy: The Case of MÜSIAD (Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association)", Bilkent University, 2002.

34. J. Albarracín, "The Role of Turkey in the New Middle Eastern Economic Architecture", IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2011, available at: [www.iemed.org](http://www.iemed.org). For an overview, see "Free Trade Agreements", Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Trade, available at: [www.trade.gov.tr](http://www.trade.gov.tr).

35. A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic depth: Turkey's international position], Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2014.

its cities), which also extends externally (from the province to the western metropolises and Istanbul). The integrative principle of Anatolian development, which, in line with the principles of the AKP, is based on a delicate combination of local dynamism and government encouragement, is accurately described as follows by Selçuk Öztürk, president of the Konya Chamber of Commerce (*Konya Ticaret Odası*, KTO):

“Konya has had to make it by itself, without external help from the state, that’s why there’s a real spirit of entrepreneurship. The people of Konya are courageous. Konya grew up alone for certain political reasons. [...] In the early 2000s, the AKP became more powerful and took power. It accelerated the development of the regions, particularly transport, and especially in Anatolia. They have a more positive view of the people of Anatolia. We’ve been able to take advantage of these new opportunities”.

## Konya at the heart of AKP networks

The “Anatolian tigers” can count on the support of the political class at both local and national levels. Like the Turkish government, the metropolitan municipality of Konya has been ruled by the AKP continuously since 2002, and the Islamist political tradition here even goes back to 1989, since the metropolitan mayor’s office was then already in the hands of the AKP’s predecessors. The circulation of elites from the local to the national level further strengthens the party’s foothold in Konya while ensuring that the city and its province enjoy a special place within the AKP’s clientelist networks.

### *The circulation of local economic elites*

Konya’s entrepreneurs are increasingly involved in community affairs, whether through politics, associations or the chambers of commerce and industry.<sup>36</sup> Elites circulate horizontally and locally in different sectors of society, but also vertically, to the point of occupying national political or administrative responsibilities. These movements tend to blur the boundaries between sectors.

The province’s most important politician is undoubtedly the incumbent chairman of the AKP’s local branch in Konya, Hasan Angı. Before taking up this post, he was first an industrialist in the packaging and metal sector, and in this capacity, he headed the provincial branch of Müsiad between 1996 and 2000 before sitting in the National Assembly as AKP MP for Konya between 2002 and 2011. Tahir Akyürek, mayor of the city between 2004 and 2018 and MP since 2018, has a similar background, having previously served as Secretary General of the Konya Chamber of Commerce.<sup>37</sup>

36. D. Yankaya-Péan, *La Nouvelle bourgeoisie islamique: le modèle turc*, op. cit.

37. “Tahir Akyürek kimdir?” [Who is Tahir Akyürek?], *Yeni Akit*, available at: [www.yeniakit.com](http://www.yeniakit.com).

The founding president of Müsiad's local branch, Hüseyin Üzülmöz, is similarly a successful entrepreneur in the footwear and textile industry, notably with his company Modeliş Ayakkabı.<sup>38</sup> He has also chaired the Konya Chamber of Commerce (*Konya Ticaret Odası*) and held numerous positions within the Union of Stock Exchanges and Chambers of Turkey (*Türkiye Odalar ve Borsalar Birliği* – TOBB), serving successively as board member, treasurer, vice-president, member of the advisory board and chairman of the tax commission.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, he sat in the National Assembly as MP for Konya between 2011 and 2015. Local economic elites have thus succeeded in integrating themselves into clientelist channels of power through their association with interest groups. As Dilek Yankaya explains, Müsiad acts as an intermediary between businessmen and public administrations.<sup>40</sup> The AKP's accession to power has given the organization a special status, enabling it to benefit greatly from the favors of those in power.

Hüseyin Üzülmöz is also president of the local branch of *Kızılay* (the Red Crescent), a semi-public organization with close ties to the government. It should be recalled that, as soon as it came to power, the AKP took over the welfare sector, which had previously been neglected by the state. Welfare was restructured in terms of charity rather than entitlement. Following in the footsteps of the Islamist *Refah* party in the 1990s, the AKP systematized the use of local intermediaries, notably non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but also municipalities and the business community, which have become the main providers and funders of aid.<sup>41</sup> Charitable work is thus one of the levers of action of Islamist city councils, which rely on religious foundations and local entrepreneurs, who invest funds and participate in what they consider to be an act of religious charity. These practices reflect a re-engagement of the party-state in this sector, where the sources and criteria for the distribution of assistance remain blurred. For example, in the wake of the earthquake that struck southeast Turkey in February 2023, the municipality of Konya and local NGOs developed assistance programs to help victims of the disaster. The Red Crescent took in 1,100 families in the district of Karatay alone.<sup>42</sup> Most of the male refugees found work in Konya's industrial sector, holding part-time jobs in SMEs while being supported by local charity networks.

Actors' multiple memberships of local associations and the fact that key positions are held by a rotating list of figures with close ties to the party reinforce the AKP's local and multi-sectoral foothold. The longevity of its support in Konya (and elsewhere) is due in no small part to its ability to

38. Müsiad Konya, "Anasayfa" [Home page] then "Üyelerimiz" [Our members], Hüseyin Üzülmöz, available at: [www.musiadkonya.org](http://www.musiadkonya.org).

39. "Kimsev Vakfı" [Kimsev Foundation] then "Yönetim Kurulu" [Board of Directors], Hüseyin Üzülmöz, Başkan [Chairman], "Özgeçmiş" [résumé], available at: [www.kimsev.org](http://www.kimsev.org).

40. *Ibid.*

41. É. Massicard, "Une décennie de pouvoir AKP en Turquie. Vers une reconfiguration des modes de gouvernement?" *Les Études du CERI*, 2014, 205, pp. 1-37, available at: [www.sciencespo.fr](http://www.sciencespo.fr).

42. Interview with the director of the Kızılay branch in Karatay, Konya district.

"become embedded in numerous economic and social sectors".<sup>43</sup> Since 2002, the party has progressively occupied all areas and sectors of society, including higher education.

## ***Higher Education in Party Hands***

The AKP's mechanisms for occupying all areas of society also extend to the higher education sector. Konya has played its part in the evolution of the national university system led by the Higher Education Council (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu – YÖK*) over the last two decades, which has been marked by the massive and accelerated opening of new universities and the development of cooperation between universities and industry (following a dedicated plan, the *Üniversite-Sanayi İşbirliğinin Geliştirilmesi Eylem Planı*). The main aim of this policy is to foster the development of the country across all its regions, particularly in Anatolia, by opening universities. The total number of universities in Turkey has risen from 53 in 2003 to 129 as of 2018. Konya, with its five higher education institutions, ranks fourth in the country in terms of cities with the highest number of universities, behind Izmir (10), Ankara (22) and Istanbul (60), and tied with Mersin.<sup>44</sup> Konya's university system has expanded rapidly, with four of its five universities having been built between 2009 and 2018. The rationale for this reform is primarily economic: the opening of new universities is intended to encourage local innovation and development, thus reducing the brain drain to large cities such as Ankara and Istanbul or even abroad.

Konya today boasts five universities, of which three are state universities (*devlet üniversitesi*) and two are private universities (*vakıf üniversitesi*). The oldest is *Selçuk Üniversitesi*, a state university founded in 1975. The other four were founded after 2006. The expansion of the university system has widened the scope for political interference in higher education since it has increased the number of institutions controlled by the party-state: in Konya, the private Necmettin Erbakan University (*Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi*) founded in 2011 is headed by Cem Zorlu, who was appointed by the president in 2020 and was previously an AKP MP between 2011 and 2014. Also in 2020, Metin Aksoy, a member of the AKP's Yozgat (Central Anatolia) branch and unsuccessful parliamentary candidate, was appointed rector of Selçuk University. Finally, the appointment of Osman Nuri Çilek as head of Konya Technical University (*Konya Teknik Üniversitesi*) was strongly criticized by the opposition, who condemned it as a political appointment.<sup>45</sup>

---

43. *Ibid.*

44. Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Higher Education Council], Yükseköğretim bilgi yönetim sistemi [Higher Education Information Management System], available at: [www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr](http://www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr).

45. "İYİ Parti yeni atanan rektörün tweet'lerini gösterdi, itiraz etti: O üniversitede AKP'ye oy vermeyenler de var" [The İYİ party objects to the tweets of the newly appointed rector: There are also people in this

However, the enforced practice of academic appointments and promotions by the executive branch is hampering the development of universities: as private sector actors observed during our interviews, the increase in the number of universities has not solved the problem of recruitment of skilled manpower.

\*\*\*

Konya is thus one of the cradles of this new Anatolian bourgeoisie, which embodies a model of liberal and religious values aligned with the AKP's social program. This local elite is also central to the party's recruitment and governance at the local level, thereby ensuring Konya's total integration into the networks of circulation of resources, be they political or economic. This unique position in the party's system of values and distribution is the key to Konya's opening up to the rest of the world.

# **“Central city of the central country”**

Having remained for a long time at the heart of a conservative, agrarian Anatolia and marginalized from the Republic's twentieth-century redistribution networks, Konya has, under the AKP, benefited from a major plan to open up the region. It is now connected to the centers of political power (Ankara) and economic power (western Turkey, with Istanbul and Izmir), but it has also established a unique place for itself in Turkey's outward-looking strategy toward the rest of the world.

## **Konya, the city of choice for the planned opening-up of central Anatolia**

Konya could not have become such an important agricultural and industrial center without the opening up of the province, which had long been sidelined by the country's centers of development. Since the 2000s, the city has enjoyed the full attention of the state, having benefited in particular from policies aimed at opening up Anatolia. The most spectacular progress concerns rail links: Konya now occupies a central position in Turkey's network of high-speed lines. The city is now the terminus of two of the six high-speed lines in service, linking it to the country's two largest cities with brand-new Siemens trains running at speeds of up to 300 km/h. The Ankara-Konya high-speed line, opened in 2011, makes it possible to go from one city to the other in 1 hour 45 minutes, whereas it used to take more than 10 hours in the absence of a direct rail link. The Istanbul-Konya high-speed line, which entered service in 2013, reduced the journey time to 4 hours 45 minutes. The future Ankara-Izmir high-speed line, scheduled for 2028, will provide a previously non-existent rail link between Konya and Izmir (with a journey time of 3 hours 30 minutes instead of 11 hours).

As with the rest of Anatolia, air links have also been developed. Konya airport puts it 1 hour 20 minutes from Istanbul by air and 1 hour 10 minutes from Izmir. There are even air links to a number of international destinations in summer, such as the Netherlands (Amsterdam and Rotterdam) and Scandinavia (Stockholm and Copenhagen). The airport, which was opened to civil aviation in 2000, gained a brand-new terminal in 2015 which quintupled its capacity. Finally, road infrastructures have been upgraded, linking the city to Turkey's fast-expanding motorway network: work is nearing completion on a ring road, while the opening of the Demirkapı tunnel on the road between Konya and Antalya will make it possible to travel

between the two cities in 2 hours 50 minutes, instead of the 4 hours previously required.<sup>46</sup> As the Konya Chamber of Commerce boasts on its website, Konya can be seen as "the central city of the central country"<sup>47</sup> thanks to its geographical position, which has been further strengthened by a proactive public transport policy. This advantage enables Konya to open up to the whole country and even to foreign countries.

### Map of transport networks linking Konya to the rest of the country



Source: KTO, 2023.

This national strategy of opening up the city is mirrored by the municipality's policy of developing mass rapid transit systems. The first tramway line was opened in 1992 between the Alâeddin Mosque and Selçuk University, followed by a second in 2015 to the Courthouse. The network now extends over 27 kilometers, with 42 stations used daily by over 100,000 people. These two lines will be supplemented in the coming years by a commuter rail line. This project, called *Konyaray*, aims to create a north-south link between the airport, the city center, and the various industrial zones with regular service by doubling the existing number of railroad tracks.<sup>48</sup> Work began in July 2023 and is scheduled for completion in 2025. Konya will then become the fourth city in Turkey to have a modern commuter rail line, after Istanbul (*Marmaray*, since 2013), Ankara (*Başkentray*, since

46. "Demirkapı Tüneli'yle Konya-Antalya arası 2.5 saat oldu" [Demirkapı Tunnel makes Konya-Antalya journey 2 hours 50 minutes], *Yol Teknolojileri*, May 2, 2023, available at: [www.yolteknolojileri.com](http://www.yolteknolojileri.com).

47. "A Rising Economy. Konya", *op. cit.*

48. "Transportation Revolution in Konya with KONYARAY!", *Ray Haber*, February 28, 2024, available at: [www.rayhaber.com](http://www.rayhaber.com).

2018) and Gaziantep (*Gaziray*, since 2022). In addition, a project for a metro line has been raised at every election since 2004. Although a joint venture with a Chinese company was chosen in 2019 to finance the €1.19 billion project, with an opening scheduled for the end of 2025, nothing has happened since then, owing to the fact that the Chinese loan required to start the work has not materialized.<sup>49</sup>

The city of Konya is now connected to the rest of the country and is gradually opening up to the world, as can be seen in the evolution of human movement in and out of the province.

## Human movement: a city anchored to the East and South

Konya’s history has seen several very different waves of migration. A look at contemporary flows shows that the city’s horizons are opening ever wider to the east (Middle East, Caucasus) and south (Africa).

### ***Historic waves of settlement***

The city of Konya is at a crossroads and has benefited from several waves of migratory movement over the course of its history. As the capital of the Sultanate of Rum, the city was a popular destination for eleventh-century Muslims, mainly from Central Asia. In the sixteenth century, Yavuz Sultan Selim’s conquest of Egypt brought Egyptians to the city. In the 1860s, Maronite Christians came from Lebanon, followed by refugees from the Crimean steppes (Turkish-speaking Tatars), the Caucasus (Circassians) and Lithuanian Tatars fleeing the Crimean and Caucasian wars (1853-1864). In the 1920s, following the Balkan wars and their repercussions on ethnic boundaries in the region, Muslims came to Konya from Yugoslavia.<sup>50</sup>

A large Kurdish community has also settled in the north of the province since the sixteenth century. The *Orta Anadolu Kürtleri* (Kurds of Central Anatolia) are also known as the *Tuz Gölü Kürtleri* (Kurds of Lake Tuz), in reference to Lake Tuz, around which they are concentrated, on the border between the provinces of Konya, Aksaray and Ankara.<sup>51</sup> A large Kurdish-Swedish and Turkish-Swedish community is located in Kulu, a municipality in the province of Konya, which is the result of a migratory flow of its inhabitants to Sweden that began in the 1960s. Today, the majority of migrants from Turkey living in Sweden (notably in Stockholm and Gothenburg) are *Kululu*, that is, from Kulu. This migratory trend is so

---

49. “Remarkable Statement About Konya Metro”, *Railly News*, December 20, 2023, available at: [www.raillynews.com](http://www.raillynews.com).

50. For further information on migratory movements in Turkey, see: S. De Tapia, “Les réfugiés dans la construction de l’État-nation turc”, *Autrepart*, No. 7, 1998, available at: [www.horizon.documentation.ird.fr](http://www.horizon.documentation.ird.fr).

51. For an interactive map showing the geographical distribution of Kurdish communities in Central Anatolia, see: [www.umap.openstreetmap.fr](http://www.umap.openstreetmap.fr).

significant that Sweden opened an honorary consulate in the city in 2014, where Turkish-Swedish citizens can vote in Swedish elections. As the Turkish vote is an important electoral factor in Sweden, political delegations from Scandinavia regularly make the trip to Kulu during campaign periods.<sup>52</sup> There is also a smaller community of Franco-Turks from Seine-Saint-Denis who have resettled in Konya and have established links with the French embassy to develop cultural services.<sup>53</sup>

Contemporary international migration is mainly from the Middle East. The city of Konya is home to the ninth-largest number of Syrians in Turkey. According to statistics from the *Göç İdaresi* (Migration Administration), 120,194 Syrians lived in Konya in January 2024, which amounts to 8.6% of its total population. Konya's conservative identity and *Mevlâna* heritage have partly motivated certain Syrian populations to choose to settle in the region, notably those from Aleppo.<sup>54</sup> Although statistics are hard to come by, Konya is also home to a sizeable Afghan community, and the same cultural and historical affinities may explain this choice of settlement (Rumi came from Khorasan, in present-day Afghanistan). On their arrival, the *misafir*<sup>55</sup> (guests) benefit from five months' support from NGOs: distribution of food, clothing, furniture and transport tickets, and help in finding employment, thanks to religious foundations financed by donations from the local business community. In this way, they benefit fully from local integration networks while also increasing the latter's clientele.<sup>56</sup>

**Table 1: Change in the number of Syrian residents in four Turkish cities between 2014 and 2024**

	2014	2021	2020	2024
<b>Konya</b>	45,000	79,139	113,736	120,194
<b>Istanbul</b>	330,000	495,027	496,485	529,944
<b>Kayseri</b>	9,500	62,645	75,806	–
<b>Gaziantep</b>	220,000	336,929	450,031	427,017

Sources: Reslog compilation (2020) and Göç İdaresi (2024).

52. E. Tosun, "Kulu İlçesinden Yurtdışına Göçler: İsveç Örneği" [Migration from the Kulu district to abroad: the case of Sweden], master's thesis in Geography, under the supervision of Cemalettin Şahin, Institute of Social Sciences, Marmara University, 2019.

53. Interviews with staff at the French Embassy in Ankara, May 14, 2023.

54. A. Kaya *et al.*, "Syrian Migration and Municipal Experiences in Turkey: Inclusive Social Services", Reslog, 2021, available at: [www.reslogproject.org](http://www.reslogproject.org).

55. Turkey does not recognize the status of refugees. We are referring here to foreigners who have settled on Turkish soil because they have fled a political crisis. In Turkey they have the status of "*misafir*" (guest).

56. É. Massicard, "L'islamisme turc à l'épreuve du pouvoir municipal. Production d'espaces, pratiques de gouvernement et gestion des sociétés locales", *Critique internationale*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2009, pp. 21-38.

## ***A national and international tourist destination***

The development of tourism and the organization of the area around its tourist sites have made it possible to reconstruct and showcase Konya's unique identity as a historical and religious city. The materials provided by the tourist office especially promote prehistoric archaeological sites (Paleolithic, Neolithic, Copper Age and Bronze Age) and those connected to a pre-Ottoman Anatolian identity: the Neolithic site of *Çatal Höyük*, the Hittite *Eflatun Pınar* and the Seljuk *Kubadabad Sarayı* (Kubadabad Palace).<sup>57</sup> However, as Islamist groups have won control of municipalities, they have seized "opportunities for symbolic politics"<sup>58</sup> with a view to "re-moralizing the city".<sup>59</sup> This trend is now evident in Konya's urban policies and spatial development. The AKP is thus committed to the long-term valorization and restoration of Islamic religious built heritage,<sup>60</sup> which is reshaping the nation's Islamist identity and consolidating the legitimacy of the party's rule. In Konya, the case of the *Mevlâna* Museum is particularly emblematic: in 2009, it underwent major renovation work on the minaret and the former cells of dervishes, and renovation of the famous green dome began in 2020. The dome is presented as the symbol of the city of Konya by the mayor, Uğur İbrahim Altay (AKP), who stated in an interview with *Daily Sabah* in 2020:<sup>61</sup>

"The Green Dome is not just an architectural structure that represents our past. It is one of the most visible signs of the culture and faith we embody. So much so that wherever it is seen, it brings Islam, Konya, and Rumi to mind. It's the symbol of our city, the portrait of our faith, the yeast of our culture".

It is during the *Şeb-i Arûs* ceremonies, celebrating the mystic poet Rumi, that the city records the highest number of tourists from forty different countries – mainly from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from East Asia (South Korea, Japan, China). This trend changed with the Covid-19 pandemic, and since 2020, Turkish tourists have once again become the majority.<sup>62</sup>

---

57. "Brief History of Konya", Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey, available at: [www.turquie tourisme.ktb.gov.tr](http://www.turquie tourisme.ktb.gov.tr).

58. *Ibid.*

59. J.-F. Pérouse, "Le nouvel ordre urbain du Refah: urbanisation, gestion urbaine et urbanisme à Istanbul depuis mars 1994", *Annales de l'autre Islam*, No. 6, INALCO-ERSIM, 1999, pp. 277-289.

60. *Ibid.*

61. İ. Yaşar, "Mevlana Museum's Turquoise Dome to Be Renovated", *Daily Sabah*, June 16, 2020, available at: [www.dailysabah.com](http://www.dailysabah.com).

62. Interview at the Konya Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, December 2023.

## ***Student mobility open to the East***

University statistics confirm Konya's importance in receiving flows of students from the East. Turkey has made education a powerful tool of its soft power by developing a number of services abroad (agencies, scholarships) and facilitating the enrolment of foreign students in its universities, notably through the abolition of the entrance exam (*Yabancı Öğrenci Sınavı* – YÖS) in 2010 and the suspension of quotas in 2019.<sup>63</sup> Turkey is a member of the Erasmus+ program: in 2021, it was the fifth-largest sending country and the tenth-largest host country for foreign students in the program, welcoming 185,047 students, with an increase of 156% between 2015 and 2020.<sup>64</sup> However, the overall increase in the number of foreign students<sup>65</sup> (4,854 in the 2013-2014 academic year versus 11,203 in 2022-2023) is partly explained by the admission to the Turkish university system of many Syrian, Iranian, Afghan and Iraqi students who have settled in Turkey with *misafir* status. Turkey is also an increasingly popular destination for students from Turkish-speaking Central Asian countries, where the Turkish education network is particularly well developed: in the 2022-2023 academic year, 747 students came from the five Central Asian countries, compared with 429 in 2013-2014.<sup>66</sup>

The Central Anatolia region, to which the metropolis of Konya belongs, is the region with the highest number of students in Turkey. According to YÖK statistics, for the year 2022-2023, 129,465 students were studying at one of Konya's five universities, 5,004 of whom were foreign students. There are very few Europeans among them: half of the foreign students enrolled in 2022-2023 came from the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan. Dr. Fatih Mangır, Professor of Economics and Dean of the Faculty of Management at *Selçuk* University, explains: "Konya is a conservative, quiet city. European students who come to Turkey prefer Istanbul, or Ankara, for their lifestyles".<sup>67</sup>

---

63. U. Kaya, "Les politiques d'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur en Turquie et les étudiants arabes", in F. Mermier, *Les présences arabes contemporaines à Istanbul*, Istanbul: Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes, 2021, available at: [books.openedition.org](https://books.openedition.org).

64. By way of comparison, the top destination for foreign students is the United States (957,475 in 2020), which recorded a 6% increase over the same period. The biggest increase was recorded by the United Arab Emirates, with +194%, which made it the ninth most popular destination in 2020 (215,975). Source: ISU, 2023.

65. Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Higher Education Council], Yükseköğretim bilgi yönetim sistemi [Higher Education Information Management System], available at: [www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr](http://www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr).

66. *Ibid.*

67. Interview, Selçuk University, December 2023.

**Table 2: Origin of foreign students enrolled  
at a university in Konya in 2022-2023**

Country of origin	Number of students enrolled	Percentage of foreign students enrolled (%)
Afghanistan	344	6.8
Azerbaijan	280	5.6
Iraq	324	6.5
Iran	241	4.8
Syria	1,330	26.6
Turkmenistan	194	3.9
Rest of the world	2,281	45.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,004</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: YÖK.

Another trend is that in Konya, as in the rest of Turkey, the number of students from Sub-Saharan Africa is increasing every year. For the year 2022-2023, 654 African students were enrolled at a university in Konya, compared to 152 in 2013-2014.<sup>68</sup> The majority of Sub-Saharan students in Konya are Somalis, and this is also true in Turkey as a whole.

We can, therefore, see that Konya is gradually becoming integrated into international circulations in a way that is consistent both with its geographical situation and with the direction set by policies at the national level. This is partly explained by its position in the heart of Anatolia and its religious history, which reinforces a religious and conservative identity, but one must also take into account the development of its education system and the employment opportunities in the province. The export profile of its industry has enabled it to establish a place for itself in the global economy and to participate in the diversification of economic partnerships that are being pursued by the Turkish authorities.

## An outward-looking industrial basin

Although Turkey's exports tripled in volume between the AKP's rise to power in 2002 and the mid-2010s, Konya's foreign trade grew twice as fast over the same period, increasing six-fold from \$292 million in 2002 to \$2.5 billion in 2015. As a result of this strong growth, Konya's share of Turkish exports rose

68. Yükseköğretim Kurulu [Higher Education Council], Yükseköğretim bilgi yönetim sistemi [Higher Education Information Management System], available at: [www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr](http://www.istatistik.yok.gov.tr).

from 0.3% to 1%.<sup>69</sup> Konya’s entrepreneurial dynamism and industrial structure (see Box 1, p. 14) have driven production that is suited to both the domestic market and foreign demand, and its industry is largely export-oriented. The emergence of conservative Anatolian capitalism has thus helped build an outward-looking industrial base that benefits, in particular, from the performance of the agro-industrial sector.

Konya’s foreign trade has been growing steadily since the early 2010s. By 2022, Konya’s export volume had reached US\$3.299 billion.<sup>70</sup>

**Table 3: Konya’s top ten export destinations in 2022**

Export country	Volume (millions of US\$)	Share (%)
Iraq	291.5	8.8
Germany	242.4	7.3
Russia	228.7	6.9
United States	188.8	5.7
Italy	114.6	3.5
Poland	103.5	3.1
Israel	87.2	2.6
Romania	87.1	2.6
Egypt	85.4	2.6
Algeria	84.6	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,513.8</b>	<b>45.9</b>

Source: TÜİK.

Traditionally, companies in the province of Konya exported mainly to the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Syria) and North Africa (Egypt, Libya), but there is now a greater geographical diversity of partners, with European countries playing an increasingly important role. However, during our discussions with Chamber of Commerce officials and some entrepreneurs in the agricultural machinery sector, the stagnation of trade with European countries was mentioned, which explains the motivation to deepen non-European

69. “A Rising Economy. Konya”, *op. cit.*

70. Turkey’s total export volume for 2022 is estimated at US\$254 billion, according to TÜİK: [www.tuik.gov.tr](http://www.tuik.gov.tr).

partnerships (Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East, Africa) and to open up new markets.

In 2022, Konya imported \$1.43 billion worth of goods, thus benefiting from a positive trade balance. A quarter of imports come from China.

**Table 4: Top ten countries of origin for Konya imports in 2022**

Countries of origin of Konya imports	Volume (millions of \$)	Share (in %)
China	368	25.7
Russia	188.3	13.1
Ukraine	111.1	7.8
Germany	68.7	4.8
Italy	61.1	4.3
South Korea	59.5	4.2
India	53.2	3.7
Brazil	43.3	3
Saudi Arabia	40.5	2.8
Vietnam	37	2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,030.7</b>	<b>72</b>

Source: TÜİK.

Konya’s integration into international trade has been supported by an institutional effort. Every year since 2004, the first international trade fair for mechanized agriculture in Konya has attracted visitors from over a hundred countries around the world. The fair, organized by Tüyap, Turkey’s leading business events company, is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year. In 2023,<sup>71</sup> 21% of visitors came from Europe, 12% from the Balkans, 21% from Africa, 18% from the Middle East, 22% from Asia and Oceania and 7% from North and South America. The ten countries with the highest number of exhibitors after Turkey were Germany, Georgia, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, Sudan and Syria.

71. Konya Agricultural Fair, *Post Show Report*, Tüyap, 2023, available at: [www.konyaagriculture.com](http://www.konyaagriculture.com).

This geographical diversity reflects the diversification of Turkey's economic partners. However, perhaps the most unexpected development has been the pursuit of markets in Sub-Saharan Africa by Konya entrepreneurs since the early 2000s. In this respect, they are following a more general trend: the "Anatolian tigers" actually led the way in establishing a Turkish presence south of the Sahara as early as the late 1990s. Although its importance is still marginal, the Sub-Saharan market is particularly promising for the industries of the province studied here, especially in the agri-food and agricultural machinery sectors. Selçuk Öztürk, President of the Konya Chamber of Commerce, sees the future in these terms:

"Konya will become an increasingly important city in Africa. We arrived in North Africa thanks to entrepreneurs, and now we're present in the rest of Africa. Konya will sell more and buy more in Africa".<sup>72</sup>

---

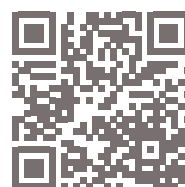
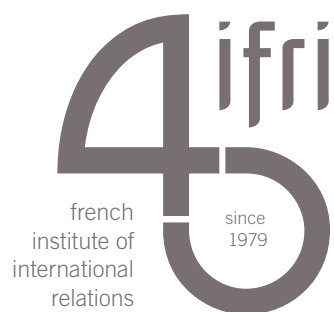
72. Interview with Selçuk Öztürk, President of the Konya Chamber of Commerce, December 2023.

# Conclusion

As Turkey's breadbasket and a city of history and religion thanks to its Seljuk and Mevlevi heritage, Konya remained for a long time sidelined from the development taking place in the west of the country, which had been the real beating heart of the empire since the time of the Ottomans. It became an important industrial center in the 1990s, thanks to the rural exodus and the local and national success of an informal alliance between pious export entrepreneurs (the so-called "Anatolian tigers") and Islamist political entrepreneurs (those connected to the AKP from 2002 onward). Konya's evolution since then makes it a perfect example of the AKP's model of local development and gradual opening up, a synthesis between the desire to modernize the city and to preserve its conservative character.

Today, Konya is a connected city, first and foremost, to Turkey's centers of power, which it supports by supplying them with political personnel, and which have conferred on it an essential role in the reconfiguration of territorial infrastructures, particularly as the nucleus of expansion of the high-speed rail network; but it is also connected to the rest of the world, thanks to its integration into the export networks of the new industrial Turkey. Although it was traditionally focused on the Middle East, its production is now also geared toward Europe and, since the 2000s, Africa, thanks in particular to its expertise in agricultural machinery. At the same time, Konya plays a key role in the very varied international flows of people that are attracted to Turkey: students from all over the Middle East, but also from Central Asia and the Caucasus; Syrian and Afghan refugees living in Turkey; and tourists, who come to admire the Seljuk and Mevlevi monuments that are the pride of the city – these visitors then become informal ambassadors, expanding the aura of this understated capital.





27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

[Ifri.org](http://Ifri.org)