Turkey’s September 12, 2010 constitutional amendment referendum was perhaps one of the most socially polarizing episodes in its modern history. The referendum, which received slightly higher-profile attention than a general election, carved Turkey into two sharply divided trenches—“yes” or “no” camps to the proposed amendment package to the Turkish Constitution.

Supporters of the constitutional amendment package argued that the proposed changes would bring the Turkish legal and political system closer to European standards through a number of rectifications regarding economic and social rights, individual and judicial reform, and enabling the trial of the 1980 coup generals. The “no” position on the other hand, had focused extensively on the judicial reform part of the amendment package, arguing that the proposed reform would do nothing but render the Constitutional Court (the highest judicial organ) subservient to the demands of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), resulting in the AKP’s effective control over the entire judiciary.

Although the amendment package was voted in favor by 58 percent of the Turkish electorate, the fact that the ruling AKP has declared the result “a victory” has led the vote and its aftermath to expose Turkey’s long dormant “domestic Cold War.” Turkey emerged from its deeply polarizing referendum even more entrenched—in the words of the prominent Turkish columnist Hakkı Devrim: “like a freestone peach [an easily divisible type of peach; used frequently as a metaphor in Turkish], which serves as an analogy of Turkish political nature in every incident.” But more interesting than the referendum were the public-political narratives adopted by both sides of the political continuum in order to increase support and attract indecisive voters by creating an atmosphere of “life and death.” Turkey’s run-up to referendum was marked by Hitler moustaches, “asylum-grade” conspiracy theories, and well-known warnings from both sides that if people do not vote their way, then “all will be lost for Turkey.” Such scenes are of course not unfamiliar in polarized electoral politics and unfortunately make up a considerable portion of electoral symbolism and discourse.
However, this time Turkey did not experience its usual “partisan polarization,” which identifies a strong separation in socio-politics along political party lines. This was something relatively new: a case of “popular polarization,” which defines a situation where the society is pushed toward two extremes that are independent of party politics and relate to issues about which the electorate feels more strongly. Such determinants are always policy areas that elicit an existential threat within a society, so sufficiently “real” and “possible” that it becomes impossible even to reason with, let alone convince, those immersed in such narratives. Competing narratives and “realities” clash with each other so intensely that the resultant effect is one of alienation and “other-ness” within the society. These clashes intensify as other forms of polarization, such as wide ideological discrepancy and acute class struggle, weigh in.

One such case was a Hurriyet Daily News’ report on September 22, 2010, about a residential area in the southern Turkish city of Antalya, which had labeled itself as a place only “Ataturkist, secular, and democratic” people can live. This political gated community is just one of many examples in Turkey where Turkish secularists seek to establish “glass havens,” invisible and seemingly unsegregated from the society, but serving as a way of drawing strict boundaries between those who adhere with Kemalism and those who do not. One may refer to these gated residential areas as a “secular ummah” where, just as in an Islamic ummah, a certain code of practice is observed with corresponding social and cultural side-practices, while non-adherents are marginalized and kept outside of the community.

Heterogenous and gentrified neighborhoods experience clashes (although rarely) between these communities. On September 22, 2010, a mob attacked two art galleries that were holding cocktail parties in one of those newly gentrified neighborhoods in Istanbul— the Tophane district— with batons, knives, and pepper spray. While it is still not clear what the motivation for the attacks were (religious, class-oriented or both), the attackers’ choice of target was crystal clear: Istanbul’s secular (though not necessarily Ataturkist) and liberal arts community with above-average income. In another case, some Turkish newspapers highlighted an instance in which several police officers from Ankara’s Çankaya district have interrogated and asked for identification from the couples who, according to policemen, were “holding hands in an inappropriate fashion” while walking in the park. Given the symbolic nature of the Çankaya district as the “bastion of secularism” in Ankara, such acts by the security forces create a fear or Basij-ization and reinforce the appeal of the gated communities among secularists.

Indeed, the referendum was a very explicit manifestation of Turkey’s religious—secularist divide. While the conservative Justice and Development Party claimed that the constitutional amendment package would liberalize and democratize Turkey by enabling parliament to elect more members of the Constitutional Court and the Higher Board of Judges and Prosecutors (considered to be the guardians of the secularist establishment, as well as a nemesis of the AKP), the secularist Republican People’s Party warned that these so-called “democratization” moves were in fact attempts to remove the checks and balances that can limit what they refer to be the AKP’s “Islamist agenda.” Societies that have been exposed to long-term “fear mining” practices resemble less a society over time and more a country within which different ideologies are at an
undeclared domestic Cold War. Not surprisingly, such societies bestow an arcane and transcendental value to notions such as “national unity,” yet they end up deepening societal polarization through creating new trenches of “us” versus “them” through this rigid understanding of the nation.

Turkish society, having been subject to protracted and profound fear-mining state practices almost since its transition from empire to republic, is dangerously moving toward an irreconcilable societal separation. This does not only relate to the Kurdish question, which many Turks believe to be the ultimate test of national unity, but also to other important social stratification factors: religious versus secularist, conservative versus liberal, west versus east, rich versus poor, and so on. Today, many radicalized secularist Turks believe that the ruling Justice and Development Party takes direct orders from Washington and Brussels, yet at the same time, they also believe that the AKP is trying to convert Turkey into an Iran-like theocratic autocracy and that this is in the interests of the United States and Europe. While many Turkish ultranationalists today believe that the United States is directly supporting Kurdish nationalist secessionism, they are also the most vocal advocates of buying more U.S.-issued advanced weapons systems due to their fear of losing the fight. On the other hand, while many radical Islamists in Turkey fear the proliferation of alcohol consumption, prostitution, and homosexuals in their neighborhoods, perhaps more than anything else, they throw in their lot with the Justice and Development Party, which spends a considerable amount of its time trying to convince people that there is “no such thing as neighborhood pressure.”

In the post-referendum era, Turkey is witnessing ever-present political polarization evolving into social polarization. A great deal of this has to do with the “fear mining” policies that have been imposed on the public by all walks of political leadership. Today, if this tension does not get diffused, Turkey will experience more and more intra-communal tension, which will sporadically translate into violence and more deeply entrenched gated communities.

Now rather than later, all of the political parties must take active steps to reduce this tension and leave aside populist rhetoric. More importantly than ever, Turks need to realize that their compatriots who vote for the rival party are also Turks and not some extraterrestrial entity that popped up suddenly to “take over” Turkey. And sooner rather than later, Turks need to see that the monster they think was hiding under their bed was in fact in their minds all along.

NOTES

1 Basij is the short name for the Iranian Islamist irregular volunteer militia. For more information on this, please see: Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, Iran’s military forces and warfighting capabilities: the threat in the Northern Gulf (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 132-133.

2 “Neighborhood pressure” is a term coined by the Turkish sociologist, Prof. Serif Mardin, referring to the negative impact of neighborhood interactions over individual freedoms. Most specifically, Mardin’s term was focused on the impediments toward the full emancipation of women in conservative neighborhoods. For more on this, see: Ates Altinordu, “The debate on neighborhood pressure in Turkey,” Footnotes Vol. 37, Issue 2 (February 2009).