The Construction of Turkish National Identity: Nationalization of Islam & Islamization of Nationhood

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National and Regional Identities in an Age of Globalization
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I. Introduction

The Ottoman empire had been one of the major global powers, since the foundation of the dynasty in 1299 by Osman I and lasted for more than six centuries. After the first world war, which had brought about the partitioning of the empire into smaller entities, the Turkish republic became the official successor state of the empire, encompassing what had been the heart land of the empire. The transition from the Ottoman empire to the Turkish republic implied a political reorganization according to completely different principles: Turkey was to become a nation-state following Western models. However, given that the “nation” is a socially-constructed concepts, imagined by the people who consider themselves to belong to this community, such a feeling of belonging, that is, of a national self-image and identity, first had to be forged. It was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) who played the key role in initiating the political and social change that constituted the Turkish revolution (1918-1927) and in creating Turkish national identity.

Within the Ottoman empire, most Turks-to-be identified themselves primarily as Muslims. Consequently, secularization was a central element of the Turkish revolution. What is more, the process of identity formation and dissemination by the elites also entailed a struggle against Islam and religious influence, resulting in a complicated and troubled relationship between Islam and Kemalist nationalism for the future. In contemporary Turkey the rise of Islamism is perceived as a “threat to the prevailing official conception of Turkish national identity” as a secular state and Neo-Kemalists (often wrongly referred to as secularists) fear that a political Islamism will undo many of the liberal and modernizing achievements of the 20th century. A new generation of political Islamist, the Turkish Islamic-conservative party (AKP), has taken its position on the political stage, striving to use the Islamic religion as a guiding principle for state policy and politics.

What this essays aims to show is that in fact, Kemalist nationalism has never been a form of secular nationalism, but that Islam has always played a “pivotal role in constituting Turkish national identity.” First, the nature and aims of the Turkish revolution will be described. Then the following sections will provide a diachronic overview of the revolution and the formation of the Turkish republic in a historical context and will trace the development of Turkish national identity and nationalism. Finally, the special role of Islam in Turkish nationalism and for the national identity will be investigated.

II. Atatürk's reforms: the Kemalist revolution

The development of Turkish national identity took place within the framework of Turkish modernization by means of formal and legislative as well as social, educational, and cultural reforms. Modernization and nation-building in Turkey were initiated and carried out in a top-down, paternalistic manner by the state elite lead by Mustafa Kemal, and as such were not organic or “societally-generated” movements. As one Turkish scholar has written, “the process of Enlightenment in the West became a project in the context of Turkish modernization.”

4 Waxman, 1.
5 Waxman, 5.
6 Ibid.
Atatürk's analysis of Ottoman society after World War I was contemptuous: he only saw a politically, socially and culturally backward society that needed to undergo radical change in order to be able to assert itself among the other European powers in a post-war political order. His mission became to bring the Turkish people to the same social, educational and cultural level as Europeans and to make Turkey part of the international community of modern nations — in other words “to make Turkey a European country.”

To that effect, the guiding question for the Kemalists, as the followers and like-minded of Mustafa Kemal came to be known, was not “who are the Turks?”, but rather [...] “who and/or how are the Turks going to be?” Notably, these implicit questions did not only pertain to the actual position of Turkey among other nation states in the future, but also to their self-image in the international context, thus their identity. Atatürk's ideas for the new Turkish state were tied together with the new Turkish identity he envisioned and can be summarized in the official ideology Kemalism. Mustafa Kemal's perceived role as the founder of the Turkish nation is manifested in the sobriquet which was bestowed on him by the parliament in 1934: Atatürk, literally meaning “father of the Turks.”

The Turkish revolution was accomplished in two major stages. The first stage, lasting from the onset of the Turkish War of Independence in 1918 until the abolition of the caliphate in March 1924, was predominantly defined by political and formal transition. Fundamental constitutional change took place in the form of the abolition of first the sultanate and just two years the caliphate, the proclamation of the republic and the new constitution. This stage aimed primarily at political secularization, yet secularization, or rather the pretext thereof, would be a theme pervading most reforms. The second stage covers the years from 1924 to 1927, symbolically ending with Atatürk's famous speech Nutuk. In this speech, Atatürk provided an “authoritative outline of the official history and ideology of the revolution,” that is, Kemalism institutionalized itself. Once the republic had been established, the focus of reform shifted to extensive and far-reaching social and cultural changes.

III. First stage of the Kemalist revolution: Transition from multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to republican nation-state of Turkey (1918-1924)

The political (and subsequent social and cultural) reforms of Kemalism cannot be studied in isolation, but must be placed in their historic context because, in the first place, it was the historical conditions that brought about the political climate that would serve as Atatürk's point of departure and aided the implementation of the reforms. The former Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian provinces of the Ottoman empire had fallen to the British and French forces already during the war, reducing the Ottoman Empire to Anatolia, which was subsequently occupied in considerable parts by the allies at the end of the war. The occupation and partition of the empire was formalized under international law with the Treaty of Sevres (August 10, 1920) forcing the empire to renounce all rights over Arab Asia and North Africa and stipulating the creation of independent Armenian and Kurdish states and allowing Greek presence in eastern Thrace and on the Anatolian west coast.

The circumstances created by the Treaty of Sevres, especially the prospect of the foundation of Armenian and Greek states in Anatolia, the “rump of the Ottoman state that later was to form the
bulk of modern Turkey,” were decisive for the development of the Turkish revolution for they fostered a spirit of resistance and led to the formation of guerillas and the founding of “Defense of Rights Committees.” The Kemalists entered the stage only after these initial organizations of nationalist resistance had already taken root. In fact, the legal Ottoman government had decided that resistance to allied demands was impossible, yet Mustafa Kemal, who had been sent on an official mission to eastern Anatolia by the sultan to supervise the demobilization of the Ottoman army in observance of the allies' requirements, joined the resistance movement, which came to be known as the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923).17

The role of Mustafa Kemal for the resistance movement consisted first and foremost in centralizing the resistance efforts: The various “Defense of Rights Committees” were centralized into a nation-wide association called the “Committee for the Defense of Rights of Anatolia and Rumeli” responsible for the conduct of the resistance. Furthermore, the irregular guerillas forces were shaped into a regular army, called the “National Forces.” Gradually the Kemalist-led war for independence gained an internal dimension in the form of a struggle against the authority of the sultan, who was submissive to the allies' demands. In order to legitimize the actions of the Committee for the Defense of Rights, the “Grand National Assembly” with elected representatives of the entire country was established in Ankara on April 23, 1920. In January 1921, the national assembly declared that sovereignty belonged exclusively to the Turkish nation represented by the assembly and executive power of the national assembly was entrusted to a council headed by Mustafa Kemal. This declaration, “The Fundamental Law,” constituted a critical stage in the transition from the multi-ethnic empire to the nation state: for the first time did the concept of the Turkish nation officially enter the discourse on legitimation of political rule. Importantly, it implies the need to define the Turkish nation and likewise to create and sustain national identity.

In the following month the recapture of Turkish mainland from Greece and the restoration of internal order was finally successful while at the same time European powers increasingly acknowledged Turkish sovereign rights over Anatolia, culminating in the Armistice of Mudanya (October 14, 1922). The most decisive political change of the revolution followed shortly: On November 11, 1922, the sultanate was legally separated from the caliphate and subsequently abolished by the national assembly upon suggestion by Mustafa Kemal. The last Ottoman sultan Mehmed VI fled the country and the caliphate was transferred to his cousin Abdülmecid. The loyalty to the Ottoman dynasty had been strong even among Kemalists in the beginning, yet Mehmed VI's identification with and submission to the allies weakened the support. Now the abolition of the sultanate allowed the nationalist government in Ankara, which had previously functioned in an undefined state of co-existence with the sultan's government, to become the sole governing body. One of the first official actions of this national government was the signature of the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923: Turkey was acknowledged under international law as the successor state of the Ottoman empire and regained sovereignty over Anatolia. The result of the Turkish War of Independence and the final peace settlement was the birth of the new state Türkiye in which a great majority of people spoke Turkish. Since at this point in time the majority of the inhabitants still thought of themselves primarily as Muslims and not as Turkish nationals, there was

16 Yılmaz, 6.
17 Yılmaz, 4.
18 Yılmaz, 6.
19 Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
20 Yılmaz, 7; Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
21 Yılmaz, 8; Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
22 Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
a strong need for the Kemalists to breath life into the formally established nation-state and the “creation of a sense of Turkish nationhood was the product of a long effort in which Mustafa Kemal played the dominant role.”

The establishment of the Turkish republic was formalized with the declaration of Ankara as the new capital (October 13, 1923), the proclamation of the republic and election of Mustafa Kemal as the first president (October 29) and the adoption of the republican constitution (April 20, 1924). The last instance of sultanic authority was demolished with the abolition of the caliphate (March 3, 1924) and all member of the Ottoman dynasty were expelled from Turkey. In the context of the Kemalist revolution, the abolition of the caliphate constituted the culmination of the process of apparent political secularization. What is more, it was a symbolic act, representing Turkey leaving the community of Islamic states. In a world where Europe is perceived to be Christian and Asia Minor to be Islamic the abolition of the caliphate symbolized a turn towards Europe and away from Asia and can thus be read as an aspect of Westernization.

IV. Second stage of the Kemalist revolution: Dissemination of Kemalism and the Turkish Identity (1924-1927)

The second stage of the revolution began de facto once the republic was formally established. Efforts were now turned towards the consolidation of the one-party regime and the suppression of anti-Kemalist opposition. More importantly for the argumentation of this essay, during the second stage of the revolution Kemalism was disseminated as the official national ideology and the focus of reform shifted to extensive and far-reaching legal, social and cultural changes. It is important to note, that on the whole these reforms, even more than previously the political reforms, had two aims and consequences: Firstly, they served the purpose of diminishing the possible influence of Islam on society in different ways, and secondly, the reforms constituted an approximation of Europe. Essentially, in the framework of the Kemalist reforms secularization came to equal Westernization.

In the legal field Islamic courts and sharia law were replaced with secular western legislation: In March 1926 a new penal code was adopted, based on the Italian penal code, and in October a civil code was introduced, based on Swiss example, whereby Islam ceased to function as legal ordering system. Moreover, the supersession of sharia law allowed for the enhancement of women's rights, culminating in the institutionalization of legal equality and full political rights for both sexes in 1934. Women's rights in Turkey were also endorsed in the social sphere through the encouragement to disrobe veil and the promotion of greater appreciation of women as the mothers and educators of Turkish citizen, and by extension the nation. Central to understanding the Kemalist approach to reformism is their idea that the permanence of secularism could only be assured if traditional cultural values and by the same token symbols would be permanently removed. For instance, the Ottoman social system had been based on religious affiliation and religious insignia expressed in dress code. By changing the dress code to Western attire by law (November 1925) these daily reminders of religion were removed from people's view.

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23 Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
24 At first the constitution retained Islam as the state religion, but in April 1928 the clause was removed and Turkey legally became a secular republic.
25 Gorys, 76.
26 Section IV is based on: Gorys, 76 -77; Thumann, 62-67.
27 Similar examples of Westernization and aims to reduce religious presence in daily life were the introduction of the Gregorian calender (and abolition of Islamic calculation of time) and the passing of the Weekend Act (1924), which meant that Monday to Saturday became work days and Sunday the weekly holy day (while Friday is the religious holy day for Muslims).
One of the most profound markers of the social dimension of the reforms was the public education system. Following the “Law on the Unification of National Education” (March 1924) all educational institutions were brought under the control of the new Ministry of National Education. Religious schools were prohibited and replaced by state-paid compulsory schooling with the aim to fight illiteracy and raise the general educational standards of the Turkish population. Furthermore, the national education system furthered Kemalists ends in reducing the influence of Islam on the Zeitgeist through the state-supervised curriculum and aiding the dissemination of Kemalist ideology and national identity. The introduction of the Latin alphabet in replacement of Arabic letters (1928) appeared to be nationalistically motivated, the official reasoning being that Arabic script could not authentically capture the unique Turkish phonology. Yet at the same time, the introduction of Latin script also helped to diminish religious influence by making the Arabic-written religious sources inaccessible for future generation. Furthermore it served the purpose of distancing the Turkish people from Arabic-writing Asia Minor and approaching Europe.

V. The role of religion in the creation of Turkish national identity: Nationalization of Islam

The Kemalist revolution is usually – yet misleadingly – referred to as a secular revolution. At the outset of the reforms, the Islamic religion was perceived by Atatürk as a “reactionary and potentially threatening force” 28 which could hinder the modernization of the Turkish republic and the attending nation-building project. Accordingly, the aim of Kemalism was “to replace the religious identification hitherto prevalent amongst the Turkish population with a national identification.” 29 For instance, Atatürk publicly criticized the misogynous consequences of the Islamic influence: broken and socially marginalized women, hidden under their veils 30 and therefore aimed to purge Turkish society of the dominating influence of Islam, which he felt was the reason for Turkey's economic, social and cultural backwardness. Finally, in the aim to approximate Turkey to Europe, Islam constituted an obvious element of otherness that needed to be overcome.

Secularity in a political sense refers to the strict separation of religious and political affairs and on the surface there are many instances that support such a viewing of the Turkish revolution with respect to the new political order: the abolition of caliphate, the secular constitution, the replacement of Islamic legislation, and unified non-religious education. At the same time secularism also refers to “a movement in society directed away from otherworldliness to life on earth” 31, that is, a decreasing concern with the possibly religious dimension of activities of everyday life. Many aspects of the Kemalist reform movement in the social and cultural field aimed to secularize Turkish society in this sense. However, the secularization of society and culture in Turkey was not a social movement, but an imposed change and to that effect, it was apparent almost from the outset, that “Turkish national identity, like all national identities, could not be constructed entirely in a vacuum;” 32 the social reality of deeply rooted Islamic tradition could not be ignored. A continuous open confrontation between Kemalism and Islam would have been disadvantageous and damaging to the cause of the revolution, thus the elite had to “fashion the new Turkish national identity in relation to their society” 33 and Islam had to be incorporated and accommodated into the new identity. Where possible, Islam was fought against by the elites and where necessary, it was used to serve the Kemalists identity-building project and by extension the Turkish nation.

28 Waxman, 8.
29 Ibid.
30 Thumann, 63.
32 Waxman, 7.
33 Ibid.
The Kemalist revolution took an ambivalent stance towards Islam already from the beginning. For instance, religious rhetoric was used in defending the violent resistance to occupation in order to free the Ottoman Empire from “infidel control,” showing that already in the process of establishing the new political entity on the territorial remains of the Ottoman Empire, a religious dimension was attached to the rightful rulers over the region of Anatolia.

A formal limitation to the secular nature of the Turkish political order was the “Presidency of Religious Affairs” (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), which was established as the highest authority over religious matters in the same law that abolished the caliphate and which was at the same time a bureaucratic department under state control. The institution continues to exist today with the mission to “execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshiping places.” Instead of a separation of religion and state in order to avoid the influence of religion on government, politics, and education, influence went into the different direction with the state taking over control and organization of religion and religious life. Consequently, “laicism, as an organizing principle claimed by Turkey, was not much more than a rhetoric.” In reality, the state needed Islam because it was so deeply rooted in society and thus the Kemalists set out to redefine Islam in terms of a national religion, resulting in the nationalization of Islam. For instance, the Diyanet ordered the use of the national language in daily religious practice so that the Friday prayer and the call for prayer by the muezzin had to be in Turkish.

In this manner, “Islam could be a cultural component to promote Turkish national culture and Turkish interests” while harnessing the strong social and unifying power of Islam.

Article 163 of the Turkish penal code allowed the monopolization of the interpretation of Islam and served to ensure that no other interpretation or movement but the official nationalized Kemalist Islam would emerge in the country. This law stated that “any movement or person that aimed to change social, economical, and political and judicial system of the state even partially based on religious principles and beliefs would be imprisoned.” A further implication of the law was that no other religion beside Islam could act within the state contradictory to the idea of a truly secular state in which any religion is allowed to act. Nationalization of Islam went hand in hand with the Islamization of Turkish nationhood with significant effect on Turkish identity: Turkish people should perceive of themselves to belong to “the Turkish nation, Islamic faith, and the Western civilization.”

VI. Conclusion: The relative salience of Islam in Turkish society

The conclusion of the preceding analysis of Turkish nationalism in relation to Islam is that Kemalist nationalism is not a secular nationalism and the Turkish national identity, constructed in accordance to Kemalist ideology, is not a secular identity. Secularity with respect to identity must mean a separation of national and religious identity so that people of different religions can be able to consider themselves to belong to the same nation.

34 Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Turkish War of Independence.”
35 Yılmaz, 9.
37 Thumann, 65.
38 Thuman, 65; Balci, 87-88.
40 Balci, 91.
41 Balci, 86.
With respect to the tensions in contemporary Turkish politics, alluded to in the introduction of this essay, a reformulation of the conflict is necessary to solve them. The conception of Islamism as a threat to Turkish identity is based on a adversarial dichotomy of secular Kemalist nationalism and Islam, in which the “project of Kemalist nation-building is seen as antithetical to Islam.”\(^{42}\) However, as this essay has shown, Kemalist nationalism is not secular and Islam has been part of Turkish national identity already under Atatürk. Thus, for both, Kemalists and Islamists in today’s Turkey “to be a Turk basically means being a Muslim;”\(^{43}\) the debate rather concerns the relative salience and role played by Islam within Turkish national identity. While Islamists attach greater importance to the Islamic element of Turkish national identity and wish to give this element “more concrete political and social expression,” Kemalists see Islam only as one element amongst others and “prefer to emphasize the European element in Turkish national identity.”\(^{44}\) Essentially, it is a question of “the importance, not the existence, of Islam in shaping Turkish national identity”\(^{45}\) and consequently largely a question whether religion should be expressed and lived in the public or in the private sphere.

\(^{42}\) Waxman, 5.
\(^{43}\) Waxman, 22.
\(^{44}\) Ibid.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
Bibliography


