

TURKISH NATIONALISM AND TURKISH ISLAM: A NEW BALANCE

Nationalism and Islam have widely tended to be viewed as separate elements in the Turkish context. However, Islam has, in fact, been a foundational part of Turkish identity since the establishment of the Turkish Republic; and, on the popular level, Islam cannot actually be separated from nationalism. The equation of Turkish with Muslim identity was always tacitly understood; now it is explicit. Previous Turkish governments have, at times, won support by appealing to both nationalist and religious sentiments as well but none has done this so successfully as the AKP... The current Turkish government's rhetoric manages to appeal to both impulses, and that is why it is such a powerful brew. The AKP has been able to achieve what no other government has before: wedding popular religious nationalism to the levers of government and remaining in power whilst doing so.

William Armstrong*



* William Armstrong is a freelance journalist and editor, currently working in Istanbul.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, received wisdom has tended to consider nationalism and Islam as mutually incompatible forces in the Turkish context. Turkish nationalism – so this narrative goes - is defined by the secularizing, modernizing example of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a positivist, military man with an almost religious faith in the ability of science to reshape society. Islam, with its appeals to multinational, multiracial unity, inevitably stood in the way of the “pure”, homogenous nation-state. Such an understanding was propagated by those early secularizing elites within Turkey itself, and largely accepted by observers outside the country for the better part of the past hundred years. However, the fact is that religion has always been a crucial motivating force behind popular expressions of nationalism in Turkey. What makes the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government’s position unique is its wedding of a popular religious nationalism to real political power. Recent developments - in particular the ongoing recent spat between Turkey and Israel – demonstrate to outsiders what has been observable within Turkey for a long time: that Islam and Turkish nationalism are far from irreconcilable on the political, as well as social, level.

Popular Religion

A singular irony of the founding of the Turkish republic is the fact that for all the talk of institutional secularism, the new nation was, in fact, fundamentally defined on religious grounds. Significant numbers of those resettled on Turkish land during the Greek-Turkish population exchanges, for example, were Greek-speaking Muslims, who, in many cases, could not even speak the Turkish language. The Kurds (and other non-Turkish Muslim minorities) were also included on religious – rather than linguistic – grounds. Whether you spoke a dialect of Laz, Kurdish, Zazaki, or Turkish, religion was the most important category to fulfill in order to be included in the new Turkish state. Even Atatürk himself recognized the increased importance of religious sentiment, and was not averse – particularly in the early years of his leadership – to appealing to the emotional religious feelings of the people when seeking to unite the nation behind his resistance forces. He led the War of Independence as a Gazi, (meaning “warrior of the Faith” in its original Arabic form), repeatedly invoked the name of God and the spiritual dimension of the liberation struggle in public pronouncements, and established Sunni Islam as the state religion in 1924.

Such an approach was seen as necessary following the religious retrenchment experienced by the Ottoman Empire during the late -19th and early -20th century. The loss of almost all Ottoman territory in the Balkans prior to the First World War resulted in the flight of around 400,000 Muslim migrants from hostile regions, to re-settle in İstanbul and Anatolia. Similarly, around the same number of Circassian

Muslims from the north coast of the Black Sea also migrated to Ottoman territories in the 1860s, escaping from the increasingly aggressive practices of the Russian Empire. These migrants, or *muhajir*, had learnt to wear their religion as the singular mark of identity, and saw in the Ottoman Empire (and subsequently the Turkish Republic) a protective confessional motherland. Anatolia went through enormous demographic changes during the later years of the Ottoman Empire. Erik J. Zürcher estimates that immediately prior to the First World War, Anatolia was 80 percent Muslim, whilst ten years later, this figure had risen to 98 percent.¹ This more narrowly Muslim composition inevitably had a large impact on the policies and attitudes of the late-Ottoman and early republican eras. The decision to empty Anatolia of Christian Greeks, Armenians, and Syriacs – both before and after the establishment of the Republic – clearly illustrates how the new nation's identity had become inseparable from its Muslim identity.

Elite Secularist Nationalism

This religious definition was emphasized even as Turkey's new elites were preparing to systematically cleanse Islam from state institutions. The newly independent Turkish republic was not just neutral to religion; it actively subordinated it to the state, establishing a rigid and doctrinaire form of laicity in a country that until recently

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had been the seat of the Islamic Caliphate. All expression of Islam was to be tightly regulated by the new *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Department of Religious Affairs) to ensure compliance with the new secular order. The Caliphate was abolished; independent religious establishments were closed down; imams were appointed and their Friday sermons were written by the state; women were discouraged from wearing the veil. Myriad other cultural and political reforms were initiated, aiming at faster and more effective Westernization. All of this was imposed from above, and all was done in the name of modernization, secularization and – crucially – nationalism: to oppose the changes or the way they were implemented was to risk vilification as an *irticacı* (reactionary), against the modern, independent Turkish nation. The military became the symbol of the secular order, and the four (if we include the “post-modern” coup of 1997) coup d'états that the country experienced during the 20th century were all – at least in part – military responses to perceived religious incursions into political and social life.

¹ Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p.164.

Thus, it is clear that there was a tension – even predating the declaration of the Republic – between the technocratic, secular nationalism of the reforming elites and the religious character that was essentially the defining feature of the new nation. In his fine assessment of modern Turkish history, Perry Anderson has described Kemalism as an “ideological code in two registers. One was secular and applied to the elite. The other was crypto-religious and accessible to the masses. Common to both was the integrity of the nation, as supreme political value.”²

Atatürk’s secularizing reforms have too often been accepted as the defining features of Turkish nationalism but it is clear that such dry, technocratic reforms could not possibly constitute the sole emotional appeal influencing such an aggressive and deeply-felt nationalism. It is significant, for example, that the extreme nationalists of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – which won 13 percent of the votes in the parliamentary election of June 2011 – responded to the reopening of the historic Armenian Surp Haç Church in Ani with reactive Friday prayers, which they organized two weeks later in the same location.³ Likewise, it is striking that Turkish soldiers, felled in counter-insurgency conflict with the PKK, are uniformly referred to as şehitler, or “martyrs”, by the Turkish media.

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The AKP and Post-nationalism?

The spectacular electoral successes of the AKP, an Islamically-oriented party, starting in 2002, seemed to challenge the assumptions of the secular-nationalist paradigm even further. Here at last, it was thought, was a way out of the monocultural impasse, a tonic to divisive and destructive Turkish nationalism. Many optimistically hoped that the AKP would take the country to a post-nationalist state of peace, respect for human rights, and economic prosperity, and a series of symbolic ‘openings’ helped warm up

relations with minority communities within the Turkish borders. In particular, the government was expected to attempt a solution to the “Kurdish Question” by re-emphasizing common religious bonds between Turks and Kurds. More progress

² Perry Anderson, “Kemalism: After the Ottomans,” *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2008, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n17/perry-anderson/kemalism>.

³ “Turkish nationalist party holds Friday prayers at Ani ruins,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 1 October 2010, <http://web.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=mhp-prayed-at-ani-ruins-2010-10-01>.

was made in the European Union accession process by the AKP than any previous government. It also defanged the Turkish military – that bastion of unreconstructed secular nationalism – which it accuses of plotting a coup to overthrow the elected government in the Balyoz, or “Sledgehammer”, case.

The AKP's Marriage of Nationalism and Religion

It is becoming clear, however, that the government's struggle against the generals was in fact only a strike against one, narrowly defined, type of nationalism. Another has become evident, and this form can be said to constitute the new ideological bedrock of the AKP government. Campaigning during the parliamentary election of June 2011, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan adopted a much harder note on the Kurdish question than ever before, and – the AKP having won almost 50 percent of the popular vote – he has continued this tendency since. In response to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attacks on Turkish forces stationed near the Iraqi border in October, the government retreated back into the full scale military solution that has failed to solve the problem thus far. The feeble “apology on behalf of the state” that Erdoğan offered in November for the Dersim Massacres of 1937-39 can be summarily disregarded, representing nothing more than the government's latest attempt to score cheap political points against the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP).

The EU process is effectively dead, and the government has wasted no time laying the blame squarely at the door of the EU itself. The United States – and “the West” more generally – comes in for increasingly strident criticism, sanctioned by rising anti-American sentiments in Turkish society (a recent poll found that 64.8 percent of Turks have a “negative” opinion of Americans).⁴ Despite evident deficiencies in the “Turkish model”, Erdoğan obviously relishes being idolized across the Arab world and, emboldened by a booming economy, he flexes his muscles on the world stage as no Turkish leader has before. Appealing to the collective libido dominandi, such behavior wins him ever more support back home. Boorish populism is prosecuted in the name of greater and deeper democracy.

The equation of Turkish with Muslim identity was always tacitly understood; now it is explicit. Whilst previous Turkish administrations have, at times, won support by appealing to both nationalist and religious sentiments as well, none have done so as successfully as the AKP. Erdoğan differs from Turgut Özal in degree, organization and success, having become the first leader in Turkish history to win three consecutive elections, with a consistently rising share of the vote. The AKP's real innovation lies in its ability to achieve what no other government has before:

⁴ Talip Küçükcan, “Arab Image in Turkey,” Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) Research Report, June 2010, p.25, <http://www.setav.org/ups/dosya/35086.pdf>.

wedding populist religious nationalism to the levers of government and remaining in power whilst doing so.

The New Paradigm and the Turkey-Israel Dispute

As with all nationalist movements, the AKP's needs outside foes against which to define itself, and perhaps the most significant of these today is Israel. The raid by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) on the Turkish "Mavi Marmara" aid ship bound for Gaza in 2010 caused widespread public and political outrage, and the Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relationship has since deteriorated to such a degree that Turkey

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has almost entirely suspended political, military and economic ties with Israel. Owing to the widespread popular support for the government on this issue, the AKP has no motivation to desist; indeed one could argue that it may even have an interest in prolonging, even escalating the dispute. The spat brings into sharp focus the elision that has occurred between nationalism and religion: a hitherto unheard-of instance of secular nationalism and emotional religious indignation uniting in a common cause.

Nationalism and religion have been the two primary energizing forces in Turkish society for almost a hundred years, even if one has always dictated to the other. The current Turkish government's rhetoric manages to appeal to both impulses, and that is why it is such a powerful brew.