

FLAGS AGAINST FEARS AND UNCERTAINTIES

Turkish nationalism is an enduring theme in Turkish public and political life and it is the common denominator in the political spectrum. Many Turks feel insecure, due to American policies on the Middle East, Kurdish separatism, the clash among its own elites, and the negative wind blowing from Europe. The fear of uncertainties has fuelled a new nationalist fervour containing anti-American, anti-imperialist, and xenophobic feelings. The process of negotiations with the EU has not only unearthed historically rooted mutual preconceptions but it has also touched upon handed down and unquestioned Turkish narratives and reshuffled power balances within the political system.

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Whereas Turkey has experienced an unprecedented reform boost which opened the way for membership talks with the European Union, observers gauge a simultaneous upsurge of Turkish nationalism and a growing tendency towards isolationism.

Since the founding of the republic, nationalism has maintained a strong appeal to the majority of the Turkish public and nationalist rhetoric has been more present in the public discourse than in most other European states. Nationalist symbols, themes, and rhetoric are commonplace features in the political and public life of Turkey. The overall presence of Turkish flags, portraits of Atatürk or huge size paroles written in stone saying: “*How fortunate are those who can call themselves a Turk*” are visible signs of Kemalist nationalism. While rhetoric about the glory and grandeur of the nation would sound odd and frightening in other Western European countries, in Turkey, it is a part of the political discourse and, seemingly, no one takes exception to it.

An opinion poll conducted in April 2006 made clear that 62 percent of the population identified themselves as “nationalists” and among them 32.3 percent declared themselves as “fully nationalist”. It is not surprising that political parties have applied nationalist rhetoric, as another 51.3 percent declared that the fact that a party is nationalist would positively affect their voting behaviour.

Nationalist themes and rhetoric are not features exclusive to the political right, but they are a common denominator of political parties of all different shades. Even liberals and the political left have applied nationalist themes. Whereas nationalism has been an indispensable and enduring theme of Turkish political and public life, a new, rather populist nationalist wave has caught Turkey.

Populist Nationalism as a Response to Uncertainties

Despite the opening of membership talks with the European Union, a growing economy and falling inflation rates, and a stable government for the last four years, many Turks feel more vulnerable and directionless than ever.

The statements against Turkish membership emanating from European leaders, the law recently passed by the French parliament concerning the question of the Armenian Genocide as well as the European Union’s stance in the Cyprus issue have caused distrust among Turks. Voices uttering that “the Europeans” only aim at wresting concessions without giving anything, have gained a momentum.

In addition, the difficult relations with Europe have been compounded with American policies towards the Middle East, the imminent disintegration of Iraq and the rise of Kurdish separatist terrorism in the last two years and last but not least, the increasing tensions within the Turkish political system. These issues have been factors that contribute to insecurity and fear among many Turks, feelings which have been increasingly responded to through a nationalist fervour, sometimes bordering on phobia, chauvinism, and anti-semitism

The upsurge of a new isolationist Turkish nationalism is tangible through the political discourse between the government and the opposition parties and the silent policy change of the AKP government, but mainly through the public manifestations of small but well organized groups, NGOs, and intellectuals.

What can be gauged is the spreading of a new nationalist popular culture, which has stressed anti-imperialist and anti-American feelings. Films, series, fiction, and “semi-scientific” books emphasizing the proud history, the grandeur and honor of the Turkish nation have proliferated. Many of them are dealing with conspiracy theories revolving around the themes of the partition of the country. Turkey is mainly portrayed as a “*grande nation*” whose rise is hampered by the imperialist aspirations of foreign powers and their internal collaborators. They emphasize the militarist qualities of the Turks and often contain strong anti-American and anti-Semitic features, a phenomenon which is rather new in the Turkish context.

One such example is the movie *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, a powerful manifestation of this new nationalist sentiment which includes strong anti-American and anti-Israeli features. The film tells the story of a Rambo-like Turkish agent, who sets off for Iraq in order to defend justice, revenge American atrocities, and to restore the “honor of Turkey”. U.S. troops are portrayed as cruel and blood-thirsty, indiscriminately and joyfully killing Iraqi civilians. The movie portrays the people of Iraq as primitive, timid, and religious who are in need of Turkey’s “big brother” like assistance. The film also alludes to anti-Semitic prejudices, as it contains scenes of massacres of Iraqi civilians committed in order to sell kidneys and organs to customers in the U.S. and Israel.

Valley of the Wolves: Iraq was the biggest commercial success in Turkish movie history, which is not surprising considering the results of an opinion poll, conducted in April 2006, which revealed that 35.6 percent of the population regarded the United States as the major threat to Turkey and that 25.8 percent thought that the imminent disintegration of Iraq, the prospect of a Kurdish state at the doors of Turkey, and the uncertainties connected therewith is the major threat to Turkey.

Other by-products of the new nationalist wave are books with nationalist themes, such as the fiction book “Metal Storm” (*Metal Fırtına*). It narrates the heroic defence of the Turkish homeland against the Western aggressors in a future war between Turkey and the United States. Another very popular book is “Those Crazy Turks” (*Şu Çılgın Türkler*), which narrates, the story of the nationalist thesis of the Turks’ heroic War of Independence.

The common denominator of these products is their Turkey-centered nationalist world view, which emphasizes Turkey’s grandeur and strength. They appeal to many Turks’ pursuit for importance which is often projected into the demand for the restoration of Turkey’s “pride”. According to many Turks, the country’s pride is hurt by the “West’s” unfair and sometimes humiliating treatment.

The so called “bag crisis” (Çuval Krizi) in 2003, when eleven Turkish special force officers were arrested in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniya and marched off with bags pulled over their heads for questioning, was such an event which fuelled nationalism and which left deep traces in the common memory.

The Fear of the Other

Although not openly manifested, the nationalist wave also contains religious aspects, as Christians and Jews are portrayed as the threatening “other.” Turkishness is clearly defined as being Muslim. 45.1 percent declared according to the same opinion poll, conducted in April 2006, that being without any religion was not compatible with Turkishness and 38.1 percent stated that being either Christian or Jewish and Turkishness were mutually exclusive features.

69 percent declared they would not want to be neighbors of drug addicts, 60.8 percent of atheists or people without any religion, followed by 58.7 percent who do not want to be neighbors of homosexuals, 56.7 percent do not want to live door to door with Jews and 53.5 percent with Christians.

Turkishness is clearly identified with a certain morale system, which is according to many Turks under threat. Urbanization, socio-economic transformation, corruption, the influx of new lifestyle-images in the course of globalization, and the role of the media in this process have been factors which enhanced the feeling that traditional Turkish values are in erosion. Another survey conducted in June 2006 reveals that social conservatism has been a prevailing feature. 67 percent of the interviewees declared that in times of transition and change, Turkey as a society should embrace its own values and return to authenticity.

Turkish society is in a transition process, which has caused fear of the “other” (xenophobia) and enhanced the desire for retreat to well-known paradigms. Many scared and insecure Turkish citizens react to any demands for change, be it from within Turkey or from outside, with a rally around nationalist symbols and paradigms, which serve as an anchor in a wide and stormy sea.

A recent rallying around the Turkish flag can be accounted in this context. It was prompted by an incident in March 2005, in the city of Mersin, where Kurdish youngsters attempted to burn the Turkish flag during a Kurdish demonstration. The reaction was a nationalist protest, manifested through Turkish flags, flying from private apartments, cars, bridges, and public buildings. Another, rather new phenomenon are the large, newly erected flags flying from ever growing flagpoles, mainly situated at strategic and touristic spots. They are mostly erected in military areas and in barracks. They seem to communicate visitors the message: “*Watch out, this land belongs to us!*”

A comprehensible message in the light of 50.3 percent of the Turkish population thinking that the European Union aims to partition their country.

The Statist Narrative, The Political Dominates Over The Cultural

The fear of Turkey's partition by foreign powers is a deeply rooted sentiment in Turkish society. The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the conditions from which the modern Turkish state emerged have stamped in a certain perception of history. School education and textbooks have conveyed a statist narrative, which has been passed on from one generation to the next and which remains rather unchallenged and unquestioned. In the National Education Law, the instruction of "Atatürk's nationalism," national culture and morality is described as a cornerstone of the Turkish education system.

As the Turkish public education has left rather little room for critical thinking and the individualization of thinking, very few members of Turkish society have dared to challenge and question the statist narrative. The statist narrative is two-fold, it portrays the Turks in two different ways, as victims who were exploited, slaughtered, and humiliated by the foreign powers in times of disunity, and as a heroic people in their just national fight against imperialism in times of unity.

According to this perception of history, the Turks possess the absolute and just truth; dark spots in history such as the question of the Armenian Genocide or the exchange of Greeks and Turks in order to create a homogeneous nation are not questioned.

University scholars, intellectuals, artists, leftist and right-wing movements, youth organizations, the free media, and civil organizations are actors from which critical thinking could be expected however, in Turkey's case, it can be argued that so far none have seriously intellectually challenged the statist narrative.

Şerif Mardin accounts that while engaging in politics, the Turkish intellectual has always spoken from within a group rather than raising his/her own individual voice. Those who have dared to do so have been treated as traitors, separatists, or collaborators of foreign powers. Orhan Pamuk's statement in an interview for a Swiss newspaper, that "Thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody dares to talk about it," caused a wave of nationalist protest. In the eyes of many, challenging the statist narrative is equal to betrayal and serves those aiming to partition the territory of the nation. After all, 30.2 percent of the population declared that Pamuk's statement was the current event which annoyed them most.

The handed down memories of the Peace Treaty of Sevres, which stipulated the partition of the country after World War I, and the subsequent national War of Independence caused attentiveness against foreign foes and their internal collaborators into people's minds. Any thinking which lies beyond the lines drawn by the state's narrative has been assessed as being a threat to the unity of the nation. Today, all issues suspected to affect national unity and state sovereignty have been examined with extreme circumspection and intransigence.

Kemalist Nationalism

Turkish nationalism was not the motive of a popular movement, unlike the nationalism among many of the non-Turkish subjects of the Empire that spread from intellectuals or the church to the people and challenged Ottoman rule. In the Turkish context, nationalism was the product of the intellectuals' search for solutions to stop the decay of the multi-ethnic Empire. Ideological concepts did not evolve as a consequence of social pressure or social movements but reflected different approaches of the elites to the persistent question of: "*how to save the state?*" Thus, from the onset on Turkish nationalism attained a defensive connotation.

The First World War dealt the deathblow to the Ottoman Empire. The Peace Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920 stipulated the partition of the defeated Empire and reduced the Turkish controlled territory to a small strip in Central Anatolia. The War of Independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), against the militarily superior occupiers gave birth to the Turkish Republic.

After a painful and heroic resistance against the militarily superior occupiers a nation had to be built. The Turkish nation did not rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. As Anatolia's population was all but ethnically homogeneous, the Turkish nation was rather made in the image of the Kemalist elite which won the national struggle against foreign invaders and the old regime.

The leitmotif of Atatürk's thought was to build a strong and united, modern nation, which should not face the same ills as the Ottoman Empire. If modern Turkey did not want to be exposed to western imperialism, it had to reach the same level as the West and become a part of the western system.

The separation of political affairs from religious ones was a necessary precondition for the creation of a modern nation. The "Kemalist Revolution" meant a radical shift from a religious-based to a nation-based system which included the abolition of the Islamic law and other Islamic institutions. Besides cultural issues, such as the introduction of the Latin alphabet, the reform of the Turkish language and western dress codes, the Kemalist regime adopted western civil laws, including women's rights such as the right to divorce, women's suffrage, and a new law of inheritance.

The Kemalist leadership regarded Islam and the Islamic tradition in its omnipresence, as the main reason for economic underdevelopment and social malaise. The perception was, comparable with Protestantism, that Turkish Islam should be minimized to the private of the individual and should not play any social or political role in the public sphere.

Turkish nationalism should replace many social functions of Islamic religion and create a new, secular communitarian ethos.

However, the Republican regime could not entirely do without Islamic religion. Atatürk wanted to unite Turkey's heterogeneous society into a unitary body. The founding fathers of the Republic were not concerned with local, social, or ethnic differences within society, but they wanted to create a unitary Turkish nation as an organic social concept, without social or religious divisions and where, under the guidance of the state, different social groups would work together for the welfare of the national community. Sunni Islam was functionalized as a uniting common cultural factor of the majority of the population of Turkey. One can therefore say that the Turkish nation was defined as being Sunni Muslim.

Whereas a Christian Arab is not a contradiction in terms, Turkish identity was defined as being Sunni Muslim. A person who is not a Muslim is usually referred to as a minority person or a Turkish citizen, but not a Turk. Turk designates an ethno-religious characteristic of a political community, an attribute which few citizens do not possess.

The Kemalist Elites, The Representatives of "True" Nationalism

The Kemalist Republic was a project of the urban elites. Faced with a traditional society, the state elites saw themselves as a progressive vanguard, superior to and independent from society. They regarded themselves as the real servants of the state, the only protectors of public interest and the main promoters of modernization. They maintained their dominance over the state, and often treated society as an arena to be mapped, controlled, and "civilized" without any say of its own.

The Kemalist ideal has been that of a rational democracy, with educated, enlightened citizens. As Turkish realities have been different from this utopia, Kemalist elites, even though in theory democrats, have taken on an undemocratic and dogmatic definition of Kemalism. They have considered it their right and duty to direct and educate the "backward" bulk of the populace.

Even after the transition to a multiparty democracy in 1946, the state elites were unwilling to accept democratic rule and decisions as a result of popular sovereignty. Instead of limiting the power of the state, the military and the bureaucracy, which had remained in command of the central state powers, guaranteed their influence (i.e. state authority) to the impediment of the development of democratic dynamics. Continuing the Ottoman tradition, the state was perceived as an independent entity. Loyalty to the state has been an important value since. National education was a central feature of the Republican campaign to create a hegemonic culture, to sanctify and glorify the state.

The army as liberator, founder, and protector of the modern Turkish state has taken on a particularly important role in the shaping of Kemalist nationalism. The military has been perceived as the reference for true nationalism. The army cemented its position as the bedrock of the state and the guardian of the Republic through various interventions against the democratic governments.

Besides an educative mission, the army also holds the traditional role of social merger. Young men from all social classes and different provinces and ethnic backgrounds serve together. The army still defends this task as one of the most important factors for the formation of a communitarian Turkish sentiment.

The fact that national education conveys the image of a Turkey under permanent threat has conferred on the army a central role in the defense and protection of the state against external and internal enemies.

In times of political instability unelected central state institutions such as the army, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary have gained extra power and a broadened scope of action. This was the case during the 1990s. In this period, the army's political role increased in proportion to both the mounting armed struggle with the Kurdish PKK and the political instability caused by consecutive short-lived coalition governments.

Tensions Between the Elites

Today, Turkey seems to be, more than ever, in a process of socio-economic and political transformation. The proliferation and strengthening of civil society, the prospects of future membership to the EU, the irreversible democratization process and Turkey's integration with a globalized world have set seemingly stable balances into motion and annulled established paradigms.

As a consequence of urbanization, market economy, and a globalized world order, Turkish society has become more pluralist. It is increasingly leaving the path of communitarianism and embarking for individualization and civilian society. The authority of key Kemalist institutions, representing a statist world view, have been increasingly challenged by an increasingly liberal discourse.

The rise of the ruling AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) had the taste of a revolution. The AKP's comet-like rise had much to do with the Islamist movement's opening to universal discourses, but also with the rotten-down and corrupted political establishment of the previous years.

The AKP is the political result of Turkey's transformation. The personal biographies and the Islamic lifestyles of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and of the rest of the AKP's leading cadres have been different from that of the quintessential Kemalist. Originating from an Anatolian migrant family and having grown up in the poor Istanbul district of *Kasımpaşa*, Erdoğan began his political career in the Islamist National Outlook [*Milli İslami Görüş*] movement of Necmettin Erbakan.

Tayyip Erdoğan used his biography as a "man of the people," who moved up from a humble position in society, but who was pushed aside by the Kemalist state elites, who suffered imprisonment for his political principles and then successfully challenged the entrenched state establishment. He represented those

who felt excluded by Ankara in the past. In October 1998 he claimed: “In this country there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks. Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks”.

The AKP represents a conservative part of Turkish society, which had been culturally and politically excluded by the elites. As a consequence of urbanization and integration into a market economy, they have sought political participation in the system. However, their adherence to Islamic lifestyles has challenged the all-embracing westernization concept of the Kemalist elites

This cultural and political revolt against the Kemalist system has caused serious tensions within Turkish society. The struggle over Turkey’s cultural orientation has been fought out between the elites of the two camps; strictly Kemalist and nationalist power groups, institutions and political parties on the one side and the rising Islamic, conservative elites, represented by the AKP government on the other. This tension also embodies elements of a competition over economic and cultural dominance.

However the reform process and Turkey’s EU perspective initiated the break up of old alliances and the re-formation of new ones. Whereas, secular liberal intellectuals and businessmen have paradoxically found themselves in the same line with the AKP’s Islamist grassroots, Kemalists, nationalists, and strict secularists have found themselves in the same line with those Islamists who find the AKP too progressive.

Secular nationalists and the state elites, including the state apparatus, have, since the start, suspected the AKP of having a hidden agenda. The AKP’s democratization reforms and its drive towards the European Union have been seen as a back door for Islamization and as a danger for the integrity of the Turkish state. In principle being democrats, they have seen themselves as the real servants of the state. They have feared to entrust the state to democratically elected governments, even more when they have disliked the party elected. This fear also entails the fear of loss of their world view and of their influence.

Nationalist Mobilization Against the Internal “Other”

The nationalist wave which has recently colored Turkey’s socio-political environment is not a united and coordinated movement. One can easily make out differences between the different agents of nationalism. As previously mentioned, nationalism is a common denominator in the political spectrum, but the shape nationalism takes is influenced by the political orientation of diverse and autonomous movements.

The most authentic political representative of nationalism is the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party), which is situated at the far-right of the political spectrum. The MHP represents a conservative ethno centric nationalism. The MHP

has seen itself as the representative of the economically neglected, simple but proud and honest Anatolian Turks. The MHP has often alluded to the Anatolian values of shame and honour and has promised to defend them against the westernized, modernist bureaucratic elites, who have represented the Left.

The MHP and the AKP rival over the same electorate. Both parties have strongly referred to Anatolian values, but while the MHP has emphasized the distinctive “Turkishness” of these values, the AKP has more stressed the Islamic character of Anatolian culture, moral, and traditions.

The AKP, being a fusion of different conservative groups, has also included strong nationalist rhetoric. As the opposition has often blamed the government of “selling” Turkey’s interests, the AKP has increased its nationalist rhetoric, parallel to its pro-EU reform policies. However, the AKP’s nationalist discourse differs from Kemalist nationalist themes. The AKP alludes also to a certain Neo-Ottomanism which refers to the great Ottoman past, and its Islamic essence, aspects which are denounced by the Kemalist narrative.

The CHP (Republican People’s Party), as the country’s leading opposition party in today’s parliament, is the bulwark of Kemalist statist nationalism. Under its leader, Deniz Baykal, the party has also undergone a transformation from a party at the left of the center towards a statist nationalist party.

Secular-nationalist-statist circles, under the aegis of the opposition party CHP, have become more prominent since the AKP assumed power in 2002. They have often made use of nationalist sentiment in order to mobilize against the AKP government, which is blamed for Islamizing the state and collaborating with foreign powers. Towards this end, the secular-nationalist-statist groups have often found the support of influential circles within the state apparatus.

Recently, more radical elements also promoted nationalist campaigns against prominent intellectuals, writers, universities, and research institutes. The so called “Great Union of Jurists” an association of nationalist lawyers, led by Kemal Kerinçsiz, has spearheaded the nationalist mobilization against liberal intellectuals and Christian minorities, both who are seen as threats to the unity of the Turkish state. The association has charged many prominent figures, among them Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, and the writer Elif Şafak, for their statements regarding the question of the Armenian Genocide, on basis of Article 301, which penalizes “insults against Turkishness.” They have also held demonstrations in front of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, demanding its expulsion from Turkey.

Scientific research institutions such as Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), the Open Society Institute, and the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung are also a thorn in the nationalists’ flesh. As they have supported research, dialogue, and conferences on the issues of democratization, the European Union, civil-military relations, the Kurdish Question, the question of Ar-

menian Genocide, and other controversial issues, they have been blamed for being agitators of foreign powers and intending to divide the country.

The rise of populist nationalism and the growing appeal of conspiracy theories are related to Turkey's identity crisis and fear of uncertainty. Trapped in the conflict between elites of different world views, and torn between Islamic conservatism and the erosion of morals, between integration with the outside world and fear of the "other," and between democratization and the fear that this could lead to the disintegration of the country, the Turkish society has increasingly embraced nationalism.

If They Don't Want Us, We Don't Want Them!

On 17 October 2005, when the European leaders agreed to opening membership negotiations with Turkey, the country's long-standing "European dream" seemed to come true. Today, only one year later, enthusiasm has made way for disillusionment and disappointment.

"The train we took with enthusiasm has derailed only after a few kilometers. We are so hurt that we are ready to take the first train back into the opposite direction." Can Dündar, Turkish journalist and writer sums up the mood in Turkey and continues: "For 150 years we praised Europe. The West was a kind of dream land. We admired and imitated them, we learned their languages. We imported their dresses. We imported their letters, their hats, and their constitutions in order to become like them. We joined beauty and music contests and when we did not win, we were devastated. Because we believed more in Europe than probably the Europeans themselves did. Now this admiration has made way to a disappointment, which is typical for lovers whose affections weren't returned."

Indeed, while Turkey has dreamt a "European dream" for many years if not to say for many centuries, there was rather an asymmetry of desires as Nilüfer Göle put it. The majority of Europeans have not a "Turkish dream"; they are skeptical of Turkey's drive towards the European Union. Due to its size, its geo-strategic situation, its huge population, and cultural and religious particularity, Turkey is the most controversial issue on the European Union's agenda.

The Eurobarometer survey of last year showed that 52 percent of EU citizens were against Turkey joining the EU. While approval for Turkish membership is generally higher in new member countries, it is much lower in the EU-15. Among them Austria holds the first place, where almost 90 percent of the population is opposed to Turkey's membership. Austria is closely followed by France and the Netherlands.

In these countries the question of Turkey has been an agenda-setting issue for internal politics during the last years. Debates and public discourses on the "Turkish Question" have focused less on deficits of democracy but have been

dominated by the questioning of Turkey's compatibility with "Europeanness." In light of an increasing fear of Islam, of Muslim migrants and their traditions, Turkey has been perceived as fundamentally different, morally, culturally, and politically. In Europe's search for a common identity, a predominantly Muslim Turkey has served as the concept of the convenient "other" that tells us what is not European. In this context Turkey has been "Orientalized" which has helped to define Europe as the contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience. Such discourse has constructed fixed, static, incompatible, and mutually exclusive identities.

The French parliament's decision to pass a law which penalizes the denial of the Armenian Genocide and the European Union's stance in the controversial question of Cyprus, have been recent events which have increased the disillusionment and anger among Turks. To keep with Can Dündar's comparison with disappointed lovers, in Turkey, admiration has made way to the deep conviction that the other side wasn't honest anyway. Public discourse is dominated by an emotionally charged feeling which can be best summarized as "If they don't want us, we don't want them!"

Conclusion

Turkish society is in a process of thorough socio-economic and political transformation. The liberalization of economy, the proliferation of civil society, urbanization, globalization, and the country's integration with the European Union have set previously stable balances into motion. Nationalism as a common denominator of all political parties has been instrumentalized for different motivations. Many Turks are feeling insecure and frightened by the fight between the own elites, but mainly because of US policies towards the Middle East, the upsurge of Kurdish separatism, and the Europeans' inconsistent and sometimes hostile stance towards Turkey. Another factor which has fuelled isolationist nationalism is the fact that the liberalization of the public discourse and demands coming from Europe have increasingly challenged handed down narratives. Turks have felt increasingly as victims of foreign aspirations and policies and have thereby embraced a defendant and anti-imperialist Turkish nationalism.