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The Historical and Ideological Origins of Turkish Nationalism

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Abstract. The paper explores the historical and ideological origins and theoretical underpinnings of Turkish nationalism in the late Ottoman period and the early republican era. The study draws on relevant sources and literature on the topic and builds on underlying theories of nationalism and identity studies. Under Ottoman rule, the multiethnic and multireligious populations of the empire were bound by their belonging to the common homeland, the Ottoman nation, and the ideology of Ottomanism, regardless of their ethnic origins. However, the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Greek, Armenian, Serbian, and other minority nationalisms led to the decline of Ottomanism as the hegemonic ideology. This process also induced the emergence of Turkish nationalism. The genesis and promotion of Turkish nationalism and Turkishness by Ottoman intellectuals at the end of the 19th century led to the erosion of Ottomanism. The transition from the Ottoman era into the republican period was marked by the nationalization of Turkish society. The nation-building project implemented by Mustafa Kemal and his followers aimed to transform Turkish society from a traditional and Islamic society into a secular, modern, progressive, and Western one. The results of the study have shown that the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye was not a mere transition from one period to another, but the inception of crafting a new nation premised on Turkishness. The Kemalists focus more on creating a unified national identity by Turkifying Muslim ethnic groups, while maintaining separate identities for Christian and other religious minorities. The results of the study have also indicated that Kemalist nationalism has pursued a policy of displacing and marginalizing the Ottoman past and Islam. Furthermore, the study shows that alongside the dominant Kemalist nationalist discourse, Turkish society also hosts other competing and overlapping nationalist ideologies and political groups. This is particularly evident in the emergence of non-Kemalist discourses and the rise of the AKP to power. The ascent of the AKP has indicated the persistence of alternative nationalist ideologies and discourses that were displaced and suppressed by the Kemalists, specifically Ottomanism, which has become a powerful discourse in both domestic and foreign policy in Türkiye.

Keywords: Nationalism; Ottomanism; Turkishness; Islam; Secularism; Kemalism; Ottoman Empire; Türkiye; Westernization

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Түрік ұлтшылдығының тарихи және идеологиялық тамырлары

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада қазіргі түрік ұлтшылдығының идеологиялық тамырлары мен негіздері қарастырылып, талданады. Зерттеу тақырыпқа қатысты дереккөздері мен әдебиеттерге, сонымен қатар ұлтшылдыққа қатысты іргелі теорияларға негізделеді. Осман дәуірінде империяның көпұлтты және көпконфессиялы халқын этникалық шығу тегіне қарамастан ортақ отаны және османдық ұлт (османдық) байланыстырды. Алайда Осман империясының құлдырауымен қатар грек, армян, серб ұлтшылдығының күшеюі түрік ұлтшылдығының пайда болуына алып келді. XIX ғасырдың соңында осман зиялыларының түрік ұлтшылдығын насихаттауы османшылдықтың маңызының құлдырауына ықпал етті. Бұған қоса осман дәуірінен республикалық кезеңге өту түрік қоғамының этнизациялануымен ерекшеленді. Мұстафа Кемал мен оның ізбасарлары жүргізген ұлттық саясаты мен мемлекет құру жобасы Түркияны артта қалған, шығыстық және исламдық қоғамнан заманауи, прогрессивті, батыстық және зайырлы қоғамға айналдыруды көздеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері Түрік Республикасының құрылуы бір кезеңнен екінші кезеңге жай өту ғана емес, түрік ұлттық болмысына негізделген жаңа ұлттың құрылуының бастамасы екенін көрсетті. Кемалистер этникалық ашылықтарды түріктендіру арқылы елді этникалық және мәдени біртұтастандыруға айрықша басымдық берді. Зерттеу нәтижелері кемалистік ұлтшылдықтың осман дәуірі мен исламды елдің қоғамдық-саяси өмірінен ығыстыруды және шеттетуді мақсат еткенін көрсетті. Алайда зерттеу нәтижелері кемалистердің бұл бағыттағы саясатының кері нәтижелерді алып келгенін көрсетті. Атап айтқанда осман тарихы мен исламды ығыстыру әрекеттері елде балама саяси дискурстар мен күштердің пайда болуына алып келді. Республикалық дәуірде Ататүрік пен оның ізбасарлары мемлекеттік ресурстар мен механизмдерді жүйелі түрде пайдалану арқылы жаңа түрік ұлтын қалыптастыруға қол жеткізді. Алайда зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, кемалистік идеологияға негізделген жаңа түрік мемлекеті мен түрік ұлтын қалыптастыру идеологиясы мен саясаты түптеп келгенде түрік қоғамындағы барлық азаматтар мен топтардың көңілінен шыға қоймады. Ататүрік мұрасының ұлттың бір бөлігінің іштей наразылығын тудыруының бірден бір себебі – кемалистік режимнің жаңа мемлекет пен ұлтты құру жолында осман тарихы және ислам діні секілді түрік халқының тарихи жадысы мен ұлттық болмысының ажырамас бөлігі саналатын құндылықтар жүйесін көлеңкеде қалдырып, қоғамдық-саяси өмірден ығыстырып шығару әрекеттері болды. Осының салдарынан зерттеу нәтижесі көрсеткендей, Мұстафа Кемал Ататүріктің саясаты жаңа түрік мемлекеті мен жаңа ұлтты құру бағытында өшпес мұра қалдырса да, түрік қоғамының барлық бөлігі кемалистік идеологияны қабылдаған жоқ. Өз кезегінде бұл Әділет және даму партиясы (ӘДП) сынды кемализмге балама саяси күштер мен идеологиялардың саяси сахнаға көтерілуіне алып келді. Ердоғанның жетекшілігіндегі ӘДП-нің билікке келуі елдің дәстүрлі кемалистік курстан ауытқып, басқа бағытқа қарай жылжуына ықпал етті.

Түйін сөздер: ұлтшылдық; османшылдық; түрікшілдік; ислам; зайырлылық; кемализм; Осман империясы; Түркия; батыстану

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Исторические и идеологические истоки турецкого национализма

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Аннотация. В статье исследуются исторические и идеологические истоки, а также теоретические основы турецкого национализма в поздний османский период и раннюю республиканскую эпоху. Исследование опирается на источники и литературу по данной теме и строится на основных теориях национализма и идентичности. Под османским владычеством многоэтническое и многоконфессиональное население империи было связано принадлежностью к общей родине, османской нации и идеологии османизма независимо от этнического происхождения. Однако упадок Османской империи и подъём греческих, армянских, сербских и других националистических движений меньшинств привели к упадку османизма как гегемонистской идеологии. Этот процесс также способствовал появлению турецкого национализма. Зарождение и распространение турецкого национализма и формирование турецкой идентичности османской интеллигенцией в конце XIX века привело к эрозии османизма. Переход от османской эпохи к республиканскому периоду был отмечен процессом этнификации турецкого общества. Проект национального строительства, осуществляемый Мустафой Кемалем и его последователями, был направлен на преобразование турецкого общества из отсталого «восточного» и «исламского» в «современное», «прогрессивное», «западное» и «светское». Результаты исследования показали, что создание Турецкой Республики было не просто переходом от одного периода к другому, а началом формирования новой нации, основанной на турецкой идентичности. Кемалисты уделяли больше внимания этнической и культурной гомогенизации страны посредством политики тюркизации этнорелигиозных меньшинств. Результаты исследования также показали, что кемалистский национализм проводил политику вытеснения и маргинализации османского прошлого и ислама. Более того, исследование выявило, что помимо доминирующего кемалистского националистического дискурса, в турецком обществе существуют и другие конкурирующие националистические идеологии и политические силы, что особенно отразилось в усилении некемалистских дискурсов и приходе к власти Партии справедливости и развития (ПСР). Несмотря на то, что кемализму удалось достичь своей цели, то есть создания новой нации посредством национальной политики, инициированной государством и осуществляемой сверху вниз, в конечном итоге кемалистский национализм глубоко травмировал современную турецкую нацию из-за разрыва с османским прошлым, в итоге не сумев создать «интегрированную и целостную национальную идентичность». Все попытки интегрировать и ассимилировать различные группы населения в гражданское общество республики не принесли ожидаемых результатов, и в итоге гегемонистский кемалистский дискурс не был принят всеми социальными группами турецкого общества. Появление Партии справедливости и развития (ПСР) свидетельствует о сохранении альтернативных националистических идеологий и дискурсов, которые были вытеснены и подавлены кемалистами, в частности османизма, который стал мощным националистическим дискурсом как во внутренней, так и во внешней политике Турции.
Ключевые слова: национализм; османизм; турецкость; ислам; секуляризм; кемализм; Османская империя; Турция; вестернизация

Introduction

The study examines the roots of Turkish nationalism and national identity, their historical, conceptual, ideological, intellectual, and theoretical underpinnings. The study also investigates the emergence and development of Turkish nationalism from the late Ottoman era throughout the republican period. The relevance and significance of the study lie in the fact that the birth of Turkish nationalism did not precede Turkish statehood; rather, it came into being long after the Ottoman state had established and existed. In this case, Aktar, Kızılyürek, and Özkırımlı argue that the emergence of Turkish nationalism acquired the form of "a transition from 'state' to 'nation" (Aktar, Kızılyürek, and Özkırımlı 2010: xiv). Turkish nationalism emerged as a response to the weakening and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century among Ottoman officers and intellectuals. The establishment of the control over the Ottoman state by European educated progressive civilian and military bureaucrats known as the Young Turks at the beginning of the 20th century eventually culminated in the creation of the republican system in 1923, which not only crafted a new Westernized and secular political system, but also, forged a new Turkish nation and identity (Aktar, Kızılyürek and Özkırımlı 2020: xiv). Moreover, mainstream Kemalist Turkish nationalism discarded old nationalist attachments and jettisoned the Ottoman-Islamic legacy, instead adopting a new modernist secular discourse (Aktar, Kızılyürek, and Özkırımlı 2010: xiv). Although Kemalism became the driving force behind a dramatic transition from the Ottoman era into a new republican age and revolutionary changes sweeping Turkish society, eventually the Kemalist discourse could not bridge the moral gap resulting from the rejection of the value system based on Ottomanism and Islam (Aktar, Kızılyürek, and Özkırımlı 2010: xiv). Despite Kemalism being able to achieve its goal of crafting a new nation through the top-down state-inspired mechanisms, eventually Kemalist nationalism deeply traumatized modern Turkish ethnic and national identity due to its rupture with the Ottoman past, having eventually failed to produce "an integrated and seamless national identity." All attempts to integrate and assimilate the diverse populations into the civic body of the republic have not yielded expected outcomes, and ultimately, the hegemonic Kemalist discourse has not been embraced by all segments and members of Turkish society (Aktar, Kızılyürek, and Özkırımlı 2010: xiv). As a result, in contemporary Turkish politics and society, rival nationalist discourses increasingly challenge the Kemalist discourse. The importance of the study also stems from the various dimensions and expressions of Turkish nationalism, including linguistic, ethnic, cultural, state-driven, civic nationalism, pan-Turkism, Turanism, religious nationalism, and the presence of multiple local Turkish identities and sub-identities. Yet it should be noted that the current study focuses on the birth of Turkish nationalism, and considering other forms of nationalisms in Türkiye is beyond the scope of this research.

Methods and materials

The methodology of the study is based on research methods and approaches in nationalism studies. Specifically, the study employs historical analysis, critical discourse, content analysis, case study, and comparative analysis. The method of historical analysis allows us to critically examine historical data pertaining to the topic, and it also helps gain a proper understanding of the historical roots, origins, and development of a nation, nationalism, and nationalist ideologies, discourses, and narratives. Critical discourse analysis and content analysis are essential to explore and analyze written and oral texts, speeches, programs, and other historical

and political data to uncover discourses, ideologies, and narratives of nationalism. While a case study is instrumental in delving into the Ottoman and modern Turkish contexts to understand the origin and evolution of Turkish nationalism, a comparative analysis is of great importance in comparing and contrasting different forms of nationalism, Turkish nationalism under the Ottomans and in the republican era, as well as revealing conceptual and ideological overlaps and divergences between rival nationalisms in Turkish society. The study references relevant sources and literature related to the topic. In examining the research problem, we have incorporated studies by Turkish scholars as well as researchers from other countries. The conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the study are theories of nationalism and identity studies. In terms of theoretical perspectives, Turkish nationalism can be understood through both primordialism and constructivism. The former considers a nation an ancient and organic community of people united by shared blood and ancestry, while the latter posits that nations and nationalism are artificial and ideological constructs. (Heywood 2021: 132–133).

Literature review

The historiography of Turkish nationalism and national identity is complex and multifaceted. Various studies offer different perspectives and assessments of Turkish nationalism. Most studies indicate the end of the 19th century as the time of inception of Turkish nationalism. According to Kieser, Turkish nationalism emerged within the revolutionary movement at the end of the 19th century, calling for the establishment of a "new Türkiye" (Kieser 2006a: vii). Yet Kieser argues that the term "revolution" was understood and interpreted differently by various groups and figures. The Young Turks came to view "revolution" as the prospect of building a new, modern Ottoman state through the seizure of political power. As a result, a political and ideological movement of Turkish nationalism emerged and soon crystallized into an influential political force (Kieser 2006a: vii). According to Kieser, these Turkish nationalists began to see revolution as a sign of significant social change within nationalist perspectives, shaping and promoting their own and emerging modern nationalist ideas (Kieser 2006a: vii). Kieser considers Turkish nationalists in the late Ottoman period to be ethnic and primordial, some of whom later became among the builders of the republican system (Kieser 2006a: vii). Hanioğlu states that the emergence of Turkish nationalists among Ottoman intellectuals of Turkish origin marked the decline of Ottomanism. This shift was particularly evident during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 (Hanioğlu 2006: 3). However, Hanioğlu directs attention to the fact that the concepts of Ottomanism and Turkism (Turkish nationalism) ought not to be understood in an essentialist manner, especially viewing them as rival, monolithic and rigid ideologies is wrong (Hanioğlu 2006: 3–4). Despite the decline and eventual bankruptcy of Ottomanism, it, alongside Turkism, remained persistent, fluid, and adaptable even after World War I. Hanioğlu argues that, in fact, Turkism turned out to be a new interpretation of Ottomanism rather than a complete disengagement with it, in which the Turkish nation was assigned a centrifugal role within the Ottoman social context (Hanioğlu 2006: 4). This process gradually led to the decline and demise of the Ottoman empire and the emergence of the Republic of Türkiye. Studies indicate that the origins of Turkism and Turkish nationalism developed and spread primarily among influential Ottoman thinkers and the Young Turks.

Two of the leading thinkers of Turkish nationalism are Yusuf Akçura and Ziya Gökalp. They were the two most influential figures in the development of early Turkish nationalism, yet they approached the concept of the nation from different ideological and sociological perspectives.

Akçura is often described as the strategic architect of political Turkism, primarily through his 1904 manifesto Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset (Three Types of Policy), in which he argued that Ottomanism and Islamism were no longer viable for saving the state. Instead, he proposed a nationalism based on race and language, viewing the ethnic unity of Turkic peoples as the only solid foundation for a modern state (Akçura 1976: 6–7, 24–35; Akıllı 2013: 28–32). In contrast, Ziya Gökalp is regarded as the primary theoretician of Turkish nationalism, emphasizing a sociological rather than a purely biological or racial definition of the nation. Gökalp defined the nation as a social group sharing a common "collective consciousness" (maşeri vicdan) built through shared language, education, aesthetics, and ethics (Akıllı 2013: 33–35; Parla 1993: 59; Saray 2022: 51-54).

The role of religion also marked a significant difference in their nationalist frameworks. Gökalp sought a synthesis summarized by his slogan "Turkify, Islamize, Modernize," arguing that Islam was an essential component of the national culture (hars). He believed that Turkism could coexist with Western civilization if the nation preserved its unique cultural and religious values (Gökalp 1988: 15). Akçura took a more secular and pragmatic approach to religion, suggesting that Islam should be utilized to serve the national interest and that ethnic ties were more reliable than religious ones for ensuring state survival. While Gökalp believed a nation was formed by those who received a common education and felt a shared identity regardless of lineage, Akçura remained more committed to the idea of an ethnic and genealogical Turkish unity (Çalen 2019: 6-8).

These two thinkers profoundly influenced early Turkish nationalism by providing the ideological shift away from an imperial identity toward a national one. Their ideas were adopted by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), making Turkism the unofficial state ideology leading up to and during World War I. Gökalp's specific distinction between culture (hars) and civilization (medeniyet) provided a vital intellectual justification for the early Republic's reforms; it allowed the new state to adopt Western technology and administrative systems (civilization) while maintaining a distinct Turkish identity (culture) (Buçukçu 2020: 159–162).

Furthermore, Akçura's focus on the necessity of a national bourgeoisie and economic independence influenced the developmentalist and etatist policies of the early Republican period. After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal activated the profound ideological break from the Ottoman past as well as dramatic social changes with the intent to transform the Turkish nation into a modern civilized nation, who would conform to European standards of civilization (Kieser 2006b: 20). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk utilized the works of both men as a foundation for his own vision of a secular, unitary, and modernization-oriented national state, incorporating Gökalp's cultural focus and Akçura's territorial and political realism into the core principles of the new Republic (Georgeon 1996: 133–134). Ultimately, Akçura provided the political strategy for a Turkish state, while Gökalp provided the sociological soul to define its people.

Kemalist nationalism became the official ideology of the republican regime, codified in the program of the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party) through the Six Arrows. According to Bozarslan, Kemalism, a secular nationalism, emerged as a praxis and an ideology of nation-building aimed at transforming a "backward oriental society" into a "progressive and civilized European political entity" through radical social and civilizational changes (Bozarslan 2006: 28). In the early republican period, the Kemalists focused on constructing a new Turkish nation mostly on a primordial basis. The republican regime under Mustafa Kemal forged a new national history of the Turks, as reflected in the "Turkish History Thesis" (Türk Tarih Tezi), which constructed Turkish history and the ethnic origins of the Turks through an ethnocentric

primordial perspective (Aydin 2010: 36; Foss 2014: 829). It argued that pre-Islamic Turks from Central Asia were the originators of world civilization and the "ancestors" of ancient Anatolian groups such as the Hittites (Erimtan 2008: 141–142). This thesis served to legitimize Anatolia as an eternal homeland and to distance the state from its Ottoman-Islamic past. Complementing this was the "Sun Language Theory" (Güneş Dil Teorisi), a product of scientism that claimed the Turkish language was the source of all human languages (Özdoğan 2019: 84–87).

The drive toward modernization and Westernization was characterized by a cultural revolution that sought to replace the Caliphate (the Ottoman state) and traditional religious structures with secular institutions. While Gökalp distinguished between culture (hars) and civilization (medeniyet) – arguing that technology could be imported from the West while preserving Turkish values – more radical Westernizers argued for the total adoption of Western civilization, including its social mores. This led to revolutionary changes, such as the Turkification of the alphabet and the ethnic and cultural homogenization of the population. Writers of this era, like Falih Rıfkı Atay (Atay 2023: 409–411) and Şevket Süreyya Aydemir (Aydemir 2024: 358-360), documented the intensity of this Kemalist nation-building project.

In Aydin's view, Kemalist nation building involved not only ethnicity, nation, culture, and language, but also included race and racial issues, which were outlined in the "Turkish History Thesis" (Aydin 2010: 36). The Turkish History Thesis pursued several underlying objectives, notably, it tried to scientifically prove the indigeneity of the Turks to Anadolu. The Kemalist nation building project underlined that the Turks were descendants of the Hittites and the ancient Hittite civilization in Asia Minor, they were builders of great civilizations in human history, the Turks were not a lower yellow Mongolian race, but rather they were a European Caucasian race (Aydin 2010: 37–38; Ermitan 2008: 158; Foss 2014: 828; Gürpinar 2013: 83). Foss claims that with the use of history for political purposes and interest of the state, the Kemalists sought to demonstrate that the Turks had always been a civilized nation and equal to the Western civilization, and prove that the Turks were indigenous to Anadolu, countering the Greek and Armenian claims to indigeneity to the land (Foss 2014: 828). It was argued that the Turkish roots in Asia Minor went deeper than the Seljuk Empire and no cultural and historical period was alien to the Turks, including the Hittite period, which were with other ancient peoples of the region lumped together under the umbrella term "Proto-Turks" (Aydin 2010: 38). In general, through a new history and primordial perspective, the Kemalists produced and reinforced the discourse of superiority of the Turkish nation and race as founders of ancient civilizations (Aydin 2010: 36). In this case, studies draw attention to Turkification or cultural assimilation of ethnic minorities by the republican government in the early period. Bali conceptualizes Turkification as the Kemalist national project aimed at cultivating citizens who would enjoy equal rights and define themselves as Turks, yet their religious beliefs are a private matter (Bali 2006: 43).

Results

The Origins of Turkish Nationalism

The Turks, as a distinct ethnic group, originated from Central Asia. According to Golden, the first historical accounts about the ethnogenesis and origins of Turks or Turkic peoples are preserved in the Chinese dynastic annals under the Tang empire from around 629 to 860 (Golden 1992: 117). The term "Turk" means "helmet", which is believed to stem from the shape of the Altay that looks like a helmet (Golden 1992: 120). In 552, Bumin Qagan founded the Turkic Khaganate, also known as the Göktürk Khaganate, which is the first proto-Turkic state

(Golden 1992: 127). After the disintegration of the Göktürk Khaganate, it split into succeeding rump states and later led to the emergence of the Seljuk Empire. The founder of the House of Seljuk was Seljuk, who was a great warlord from the Qiniq tribe of Oghuz Turks. Later, the Seljuk Empire expanded westward through Transoxiana and Persia into Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The turning point in the history of Turkic peoples and the Oghuz tribe was the decisive victory of the Seljuks under the leadership of Sultan Alp Arslan over the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) in the Battle of Manzikert (Malazgirt) in 1071 (Kaldellis 2023: 626). The triumph of the Seljuks at Malazgirt paved the way for the Seljuk takeover and domination of Anadolu and the Turkification of Asia Minor. While the Seljuks were invincible in the west, their supremacy in the east was challenged and eventually upset by the Kara Khitai state (Biran 2005: 43). The contest for domination in Central Asia with the Kara Khitai state in the 12th century and an eventual loss of their control of Mawarannahr pushed the Seljuks westward (Biran 2005: 43-44). The setback in Mawarannahr forced the Seljuks to expand their influence and geopolitical primacy into the Middle East and Anadolu. The chain of events led to the establishment of Turkish domination in Anadolu and the creation of the Ottoman state, whose existence lasted several centuries, eventually giving birth to the Republic of Türkiye.

The birth of Turkish nationalism goes back to the end of the 19th century, which was brought about by three key factors. First, the decline of the Ottoman Empire that had begun in the 18th century led to the fracture and dismemberment of the empire into ethnic realms and the emergence of independent nation-states. According to the prominent Turkish political scientist Umut Uzer, the dwindling of the power of the Ottoman Empire gradually resulted in the independent nationalist movements represented by Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, Arabs, and others. This in turn undermined "Ottomanism" and "Islamism" as the hegemonic concepts that provided national cohesion and held together multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman society for many centuries (Uzer 2016: 2). In Uzer's view, as Ottomanism and Islamism struggled to provide ethnic and cultural cohesion and parochial ethnic nationalism prevailed over and eventually superseded the hegemonic nation building discourses, "Turkishness" or "Turkism" emerged as the only feasible and viable way for the establishment of a new Turkish nation state in the form of the modern Republic of Türkiye (Uzer 2016: 2).

The second factor that brought about Turkish nationalism was linked to linguistic and historical studies in Europe and later in the late Ottoman Empire in relation to the historical roots and development of Turkish language, culture, and history. Such studies highlighted the greatness, heroism, uniqueness, cultural, intellectual, and military accomplishments of Turks in the pre-Ottoman and pre-Islamic era. Islam and the Ottoman era were increasingly associated with the decline and strategic failures, and divorced Turks from their glorious past and pristine epoch (Uzer 2016: 2). Revisiting the pre-Islamic and pre-Ottoman past encouraged Turkish nationalists to see their society and state not through the lens of Ottomanism and Islam, but rather from the perspective of Turkishness and Turkish national identity that stood apart from other ethno-religious communities in the empire such as Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and so on.

Third, the rise and dissemination of Turkish nationalism was also significantly affected by intellectuals from various areas of the Russian empire such as Crimea, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, the Caucasus and Central Asia, who contributed to the consolidation of nationalist discourses and thought in Türkiye (Uzer 2016: 3). These immigrants were armed with advanced conceptual, ideological and theoretical tools and concepts, which led them to forge a form of nationalism in an Islamic and premodern environment. Having been exposed to different theories of nationalism and political ideologies such as pan-Slavism, socialism, and others, these intellectuals from

Russia experienced cultural, ethnic, and racial oppression in the Russian colonial context. Therefore, in Türkiye, they felt themselves an integral part of the Turkish majority and thereby joined first the Young Turks and later the Kemalist movement (Uzer 2016: 3).

The late 19th century and early 20th century Turkish nationalism was heavily affected by the studies on the pre-Ottoman era Turkish history, which was largely portrayed as an era of great achievements of Turks. The core narrative of linking emerging nationalistic sentiment to the pre-Ottoman era Turkish history argued that before conversion to Islam and the Ottoman epoch, Turks had been great builders of civilization. The spread and entrenchment of such narratives led to the contempt and rejection of the Ottoman legacy and Islam, which was pervasive within Turkish nationalist movements in the late Ottoman period. Narratives glorifying the ancient pre-Ottoman era of Turkish history and ignoring or neglecting Islam and Ottomanism informed, to a certain degree, Turkish nationalism represented by the Young Turk movement and its main faction – the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti). In turn, nationalist discourses in the age of the Young Turks and the CUP explicitly and implicitly affected Mustafa Kemal and his reforms after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 (Zürcher 2005: 14; Zürcher 2010: 124).

Intellectual and ideological underpinnings of Turkish nationalism

The rise of Turkish nationalism was triggered by the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century. The driving force behind the advent of Turkish nationalism was the Young Turks or the Young Turk movement that emerged as the response to the monopolization of power by Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1878. Under the strong influence of the Enlightenment ideas of 18th century Europe, pro-Western and European-educated Turkish intellectuals of that time were certain that in order to prevent further decline of the Ottoman state, radical liberal reforms and a progressive constitution were necessary. After Sultan Abdulhamid suspended the 1876 constitution and parliament, adversaries of the sultan got together and established the Young Turks. In Hanioğlu's view, one cannot understand Mustafa Kemal's worldviews, attitudes and policies without having a proper understanding of the Young Turk movement and its political and ideological philosophy (Hanioğlu 2001; Hanioğlu 2011: 48). Mustafa Kemal's worldviews and policies were shaped by the Young Turks because he himself was an integral part of the movement and belonged to the second generation of the Young Turks (Hanioğlu 2001; Hanioğlu 2011: 52).

Besides being under the influence of the European Enlightenment, a significant proportion of Turkish intellectuals were the followers of the mid-19th century German philosophy – *Vulgärmaterialismus,* which was a vulgarized form of the concept of materialism fused with rationalism, scientism and social Darwinism that prioritized the role of science in society (Hanioğlu 2011: 48–49). At the core of Vulgärmaterialismus lay ideas that outrightly rejected religion and emphasized the quest for building a secular social order, which later would become one of the ideological pillars of the republican regime in Türkiye. Like many other leading members of the Young Turk movement, Mustafa Kemal belonged to an educated class of intellectuals, who believed that science could be a remedy for all the difficulties and ills of the Ottoman empire at that time, which would lead to the establishment an advanced, progressive, prosperous and irreligious society hinged upon rationalism, science and secularism (Hanioğlu 2011: 50). The advocates and supporters of science and rationalism believed in the supremacy of science over religion and came to understand history and historical evolution in terms of a constant struggle between religion and science, in which the latter would eventually triumph over the former.

Thus, a belief in science or scientism became one of the prominent principles of the Young Turk ideology and political philosophy. Although under the reign of the Young Turk regime between 1908 and 1918, its leadership had embraced the official ideology of Ottomanism with the intent to deal with the multicultural and multi-confessional populations of the empire, with time they came to shift to Turkish nationalism (Zürcher 2019a: 897; Zürcher 2019b: 481). Yet, as in this period, the empire's multicultural and multireligious populations were glued together under the banner of Islam, which prevented the Young Turk regime from putting in motion its policies of establishing a society based on science and secularism. Under the strong influence of European social sciences, especially social Darwinism, the Young Turks came to argue that humans originated from fish and human life involved a constant struggle for survival and that only the strongest could survive.

According to Hanioğlu, although Mustafa Kemal belonged to the Young Turk movement and was influenced by key concepts and works about popular materialism, he never became a prominent theoretician and a scientific thinker like other leading Turkish intellectuals of that time (Hanioğlu 2011: 53). Moreover, while plunging into progressive political and philosophical discourses and works of his time, Mustafa Kemal seems to have come to the conclusion that while science leads society to prosperity and progress, religion only holds it back, corrupting and retarding it (Hanioğlu 2011: 53). Although the promotion of science excluded religion within the Young Turk movement, there were endeavors to reconstitute Islam as a materialist political and philosophical discourse that would be utilized as a cultural resource to craft a progressive society free from religion. Yet like many other prominent intellectuals of his time, Mustafa Kemal came to understand that Islam had been deeply embedded within Ottoman culture and society.

Another prominent theme within the Young Turk movement was attitudes and views of Turkish intellectuals about Christian Europe or Western civilization, in which they did not develop an all-embracing approach towards Europe. Although Turkish intellectuals were the products of a European-style education, their attitudes towards the West could be described as a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, Christian Europe came to be seen as the vehicle for human development and an ideal model for crafting a prosperous and progressive society. On the other hand, the West was increasingly perceived as a predatory imperial juggernaut that fed on the Ottoman and other non-European peoples' wealth and land. Despite such an ambiguity, the leading adherents of scientism advocated Europeanization and Westernization because only this path would lead to an ideal society governed by science. By the same token, Mustafa Kemal also shared his contemporaries' view of the West, namely that European Enlightenment civilization was indeed the epitome of progress and modernity. However, he was also aware of West's intention to undermine and destroy the Ottoman empire, especially against the backdrop of the Ottoman defeat in the 1912-1913 Balkan wars, when the Ottoman empire was reduced to an Oriental country (Hanioğlu 2011: 57).

In addition, Mustafa Kemal came to understand that Europeans increasingly perceived the Ottoman Empire and Turks as inferior and backward. Despite harboring deep-seated suspicions of Europe, Mustafa Kemal came to advocate the wholesale Westernization of Ottoman society and later Turkish society. Moreover, Mustafa Kemal was convinced that only through Westernization would create an important precondition for a society predicated upon science. Westernizers within Ottoman intellectual circles, including Mustafa Kemal himself, advocated the total displacement of customs, values and institutions that were not compatible with the notion of modernity, Westernization and science. In this regard, the adherents of scientism and Westernization called for the replacement of everything old and obsolete. The efforts to

shift from the Arabic-Persian script to Latin, the call for the adoption of European manners and lifestyle, as well as the replacement of the Islamic legal system with the Swiss civil code, reflected Westernization efforts.

Another important dimension of the nascent Turkish nationalism was the greater emphasis on the pre-Islamic era Turkish history, in which the adherents of Turkish nationalism argued that Islam increasingly corrupted Turks and that pre-Islamic Turkish way of life and customs had been more liberal and progressive (Hanioğlu 2011: 61). Although the Young Turks emphasized the pre-Islamic glorious past and history of Turks, minimizing and belittling the role of Islam, under the rule of the Young Turk regime, the efforts were made to reconcile Islam and Turkism. At that time, prominent intellectuals like Ziya Gökalp aimed to reconcile Turkism and Islam, proposing that Islam could be used as a tool to modernize Ottoman society (Meram 1969: 174–182). However, later, Mustafa Kemal shunned a reconciliatory method proposed by Ziya Gökalp, which came to embrace both Islam and Turkism as an integral part of the nation-building process. Instead, Mustafa Kemal came to believe that the use of Islam for the modernization of society was not consistent with Europeanization and attempts to craft a society governed by science. This was, in turn, reflected in Mustafa Kemal's policies at displacing Islam from politics and the introduction of a secular European legal system to govern a new Turkish society (Buçukçu 2020: 169–171).

As a Turk who was born and grew up in the European side of the empire, Mustafa Kemal subscribed to Turkism and Turkish nationalism. It should be noted that Turkism among Ottoman intellectuals emerged at the start of the 20th century as a response to the spread of separatist ethnic movements and rival ethnic nationalisms of Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and others. In such an increasingly nationalistic environment, Mustafa Kemal and other Turkish nationalists came to draw upon the pre-Islamic proto-Turkish history and heritage, stressing the greatness of Turks. In a similar vein, leading members of the Young Turk movement also subscribed to Turkism. After the 1908 revolution, they were forced to instrumentalize Ottomanism to manage multiethnic and multireligious populations of the empire. However, wars against Balkan nations and World War I reignited the relevance of nationalism in the empire, in which some prominent intellectuals, such as Ziya Gökalp, called for building a Turan empire (Uyanık 2003: 99–101). In this regard, Ziya Gökalp expanded the scope of Turkism and Turkish nationalism, highlighting Turan as an eternal country of Turks (Hanioğlu 2011: 65). Although Mustafa Kemal overlooked Ziya Gökalp's attempt to integrate Islam with Turkish identity, he was still attracted to his nationalist ideas. Yet it should be noted that later, while at the helm of the Turkish nation state, Mustafa Kemal capitalized on Turkishness rather than pan-Turkism or Turanism.

Although race and racial issues were less prominent in Turkism initially, they later became a central focus for some Turkish intellectuals during the 1940s and 1960s. Mustafa Kemal and other prominent Turkish intellectuals came to embrace the European categorization of the human race and racial hierarchies. They came to accept the tenets of European scientific racism that the Turks occupied the bottom of racial hierarchies as an inferior and backward race. However, the Japanese triumph over imperial Russia in 1905 renewed deep interests in racial issues, which motivated Turkish intellectuals to revisit and reconsider European racial categories. This in turn led Turkish intellectuals to stress the noble character of the Turkish race, denouncing Eurocentric assumptions that the Turks belonged to an inferior yellow race (Hanioğlu 2011: 66). Viewing increasingly everything from nation to religion and modernity through the lens of scientism encouraged Mustafa Kemal and other prominent Turkish intellectuals to see the Turks as a noble race and elevate them to the top of the racial hierarchies.

Discussion

As Mustafa Kemal and his followers gained prominence during the decline of the Ottoman Empire, particularly through the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) and the founding of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, the hegemonic nation-building discourses from the Ottoman era, like Ottomanism and Islam, gradually lost relevance and were eventually considered unnecessary. After the triumph in the Turkish War of Independence, as the leader of Turkish nationalists, Mustafa Kemal embarked upon the path of building a new nation, state and society. According to the Turkish scholar Hanioğlu, Mustafa Kemal himself was not a great theoretician; rather, he used and implemented a set of nationalist and modern ideas and theories defined and developed within the Young Turk movement (Hanioğlu 2011). Çolak and Uzer state that during the formation of a new nation state, the founding fathers of the republic viewed the Ottoman past and Islam as no longer relevant or even obstructive to their goals. They believed these elements hindered their efforts to Westernize and establish a modern, progressive society based on scientism. (Çolak 2006: 590; Uzer 2020: 277).

By overcoming both foreign and domestic enemies during the War of Independence and dismantling the Ottoman state, Mustafa Kemal and his followers initiated policies aimed at creating a new nation and state. This process involved a swift and thorough break from the Ottoman past to establish a Westernized, secular, and progressive society (Tokdoğan 2024: 30). To forge a new Turk, Mustafa Kemal and his supporters declared cultural war on Ottomanism and Islam, which were increasingly seen as the vestiges of the defunct empire and obsolete civilization (Tokdoğan 2024: 28). Çolak posits that Kemalist nation building constituted the top-down state-orchestrated measures and policies intended to transform a traditional Oriental society into a new Westernized secular one (Çolak 2003: 3-4). Turkish nationalism under the republican regime stood in stark contrast to the Turkist or Turanist nationalism that had been prominent during the late Ottoman period (Çolak 2003: 4). To be precise, "Kemalist nationalism" throughout the republican period has diverged from Turkism and Turanism under the Young Turk regime in a sense that it was predicated upon the principle of territoriality, which included Anadolu and the segment of European Türkiye (Çolak 2003: 4).

To craft a new nation and forge a new national identity, the founders of the Republic of Türkiye, first and foremost, divorced the new country from the Ottoman empire, and at the same time, chose a radically new path of development based on Westernization (Çolak 2003: 5). Despite the fact that the Ottoman era provided a solid historical, ideological and intellectual foundation and background to the republican regime and Mustafa Kemal's drastic reforms, and political and social revolution, the Kemalist elites sought a complete break from the previous era and erecting a modern state (Çolak 2003: 5). The efforts to build a new modern state and craft a new Turkish nation were reflected in revolutionary changes and cultural transformations such as the abolition of the Caliphate (the Ottoman state), the displacement of Islamic law (sharia), discarding Oriental customs and traditions, elimination of the Arabic script and the Arabic calendar (Kadioğlu 1996: 186; Tokdoğan 2024: 29; Uzer 2020: 277).

With the ascent of the Kemalists to power in 1923, the new nation was identified as "Turks", but not as "Ottomans," as citizens of the Republic of Türkiye, but not the subjects of the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate (Zürcher 2010: 213). Under the Ottoman rule, the glorious Ottoman history and Islam had been backbone of the multinational and multireligious empire, but Mustafa Kemal aimed to create a culturally and ethnically monolithic and homogenous nation, in which the ideological concepts of the previous era such as Ottomanism, Islam and rival nationalisms

(Kurdish, Greek, Armenian, etc.) were entirely excluded (Aktar 2010: 24; Foss 2014: 828; Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 155). Uzer argues that for the Kemalist elite of Türkiye not the Ottoman past but rather Europe and the West became the source of inspiration and informed their nation building project, in which they strove for crafting a modern Turk who would be Western, secular, progressive and proud of his heritage but entirely divorced from his Ottoman history and Islamic faith (Uzer 2020: 277). Islam was associated with obscurantism and with Semitic Arabs, entirely alien to the Turks (Gürpinar 2013: 85). Although Kemalism involved the break from the Orient and shift to the West, Turkish nationalism and the Kemalist nation building project resulted from both a hostility towards the West and at the same time, mimicking Western way of development (Kadioğlu 1996: 185). Kemalist nation-building manifested in the rejection of the Ottoman past and the invention of the distant past; the prevalence of the state over a nation (Özdoğan 2010: 47).

It should be noted that ethnic and cultural homogenization of the population lay at the core of the Kemalist nation-building project (Aktar 2010: 24; Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 155). According to Aktar, the Kemalist nation-building and revolution in Türkiye centered on political assimilation and Turkification of its multiethnic populations. This process involved recognizing religious minorities such as Christians and Jews and aimed to establish the unconditional dominance of state authority over all ethnic, religious, and political communities and minorities. (Aktar 2010: 22). According to Zeydanlıoğlu, the Kemalist elite pursued the goal of establishing a homogenous Turkish nation (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). Zeydanlıoğlu argues that Mustafa Kemal and the Kemalist elite increasingly employed Western colonial concepts, especially Eurocentrism and Orientalism, to realize their nation-building project (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). For the republican regime to conform to Europeanness and Westernness, the Kemalist elite built a homogenous nation-state (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). Moreover, to conform to the Western cultural and political norms, the Kemalist elite embarked upon the path of displacing and extinguishing the Eastern character and spirit of Türkiye and building a Westernized society (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). The main goal of Kemalist nation-building was to turn the geographical and territorial area known as Türkiye into a nation that embraces a Turkish state identity by speaking Turkish and accepting the national identity. Aktar examines Kemalist policies, focusing on Turkification and the formation of an ethnically and linguistically exclusive nation state (Aktar 2010: 22–23).

Viewing Türkiye as a “melting-pot," Kemalists emphasized that various ethnic and religious communities living in Türkiye were meant to evolve into a single, unified national identity (Aktar 2010: 25). Therefore, all ethnic and national groups were expected to integrate with the official state identity. This exclusive approach to nation-building was reflected in the programs of the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), as well as in the laws, statutes, proclamations, and speeches of high-ranking officials and policymakers, where Turkishness was prioritized over other ethnic and religious identities. (Zürcher 2010: 232). In December 1925, having emphasized certain attempts of enemies of the republic to undermine Turkish unity, the Ministry of Education of Türkiye announced that the use of terms such as Kurd, Laz, Kurdistan, and Lazistan would be banned (Zürcher 2010: 232). In 1927, the CHP’s program emphasized that the Turkish language and culture would be the guiding principle for unifying compatriots and providing national unity and cohesion (Zürcher 2010: 232). In 1931, at the second congress of the CHP, “nationalism” was incorporated into Six Arrows (Altı Ok) that constituted the fundamental pillars of Kemalism and the CHP (Zürcher 2010: 232). It was widely believed that Turkish society departed from Islam, Ottomanism, and the Orient, and shifted to European and Western civilization and camp (Aydin 2010: 38).

Thus, Türkiye's current ethnic and cultural identity based on Turkishness is the outcome of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's nation-building project and cultural revolution in the 1920s-1930s. However, since the 1980s, new alternative political discourses and groups have increasingly challenged the hegemony of Kemalism. The rise of alternative political discourses, parties and policymakers reflected the weakening of Kemalism and the strengthening of non-Kemalist movements. The very political, cultural, and religious discourses and legacies that had been displaced and victimized by the Kemalists later came to erode the hegemony of Kemalism in Turkish politics and society. The advent of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) in 2002 attested to the shrinking Kemalism's influence of Kemalism in Turkish politics. As a result, today's Turkish society is split into the "old" and "new" Türkiye. While the Kemalist regime is referred to as the "old Türkiye", the current AKP government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is defined as the "new Türkiye" (Dinç and Hünler 2025: 2). On the one hand, the supporters of the hegemonic Kemalist discourse tend to portray the Kemalist rule as an era of great achievements and progress. On the other hand, the adherents of non-Kemalist discourses believe that they have been marginalized by Kemalists for many decades (Dinç and Hünler 2025: 2). However, currently these groups seem to feel emboldened and empowered under the AKP rule under Erdoğan, increasingly drawing upon Islam and the Ottoman imperial past that had long been disempowered by the Kemalists (Dinç and Hünler 2025: 2).

Conclusion

The study has shed light on the historical, conceptual, ideological, and theoretical origins and underpinnings of Turkish nationalism. The results of the study have demonstrated that Turkish nationalism occurred after the long existence of the Ottoman state and as a response to the decline of the Ottoman empire and the birth of rival nationalisms and ethnic separatist movements, such as Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, and so on. In this regard, the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Republic of Türkiye were distinguished by the transition from the state to the nation. The results of the study have also revealed that modern Turkish nationalism, Mustafa Kemal's nation-building project, and cultural revolution were rooted in the late Ottoman era nationalist ideas and concepts, specifically within the Young Turk movement. In other words, dramatic political, social, and cultural changes and transformation of Turkish society in the 1920s-1930s under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were informed and guided by the ideas and theories of the Young Turks. Moreover, Mustafa Kemal was under heavy influence of progressive Turkish intellectuals and radical European political philosophy.

The Ottoman state and society operated on the basis of ethnic, cultural and religious coexistence and harmony of a multitude of ethnic and confessional communities across the empire. In such a multiethnic and multireligious society, Ottomanism and Islam lied at the core of nation building policy and provided social cohesion. Under Ottoman rule, all ethnic and religious communities regardless of their ethnic origins belonged to the same Ottoman nation and the common homeland. In this case, the Ottoman Empire was not an ethnocratic society where the stress was placed not upon the ethnic background of people but rather on their sense of belonging to the same motherland and to the Ottoman nation. However, with the decline of the Ottoman empire, ethnic and religious particularism and distinctions became more prominent, which was reflected in the emergence of Greek, Serbian, Armenian, Bulgarian, and other nationalisms. Their nationalistic fervor and separatist aspirations undermined and eroded the concepts of Ottomanism and the Ottoman nation. This in turn gave rise to Turkish

nationalism at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, which was conceptually and theoretically developed and promoted by leading intellectuals within the Young Turk movement. Under the strong influence of the European Enlightenment ideas and the 19th century European political teachings, the Young Turks came to reject Ottomanism and, to a lesser degree, Islamism as less relevant to their nation-building project. Instead, they focused on Turkish nationalism and Turkishness. Yet under the Young Turk rule, the time was not ripe for implementing such a nationalistic project.

With the triumph in the Turkish War of Independence, the fall of the Ottoman empire and the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, the implementation of the nationalist project of the Young Turks became feasible. The specific feature of the Kemalist nation-building project lay in its outright rejection of Ottomanism and Islam, increasingly stressing Turkish nationalism, Turkishness, Western identity of the Turks, their indigeneity to Anadolu, their belonging to a great civilization, and a white European race. Another specific feature of Kemalist nationalism is reflected in the exclusive character of nation-building, in the greater emphasis on political assimilation and Turkification of numerous ethno-religious minorities, and in building a Turkish nation-state and society. Another conspicuous characteristic of Kemalist nationalism was its methodical displacement and marginalization of the Ottoman past and Islam, to which a significant proportion of the Turkish population has a strong sense of belonging. However, the Kemalist policies of disempowering and persecuting Ottomanism and Islam soon backfired, which was seen in the rise of powerful non-Kemalist discourses. In this regard, Turkish scholars stress the failure of the Kemalists to achieve ethnic and cultural homogenization of the population. Moreover, the rise of the AKP under the leadership of Erdoğan in 2002 was a clear indication of a dramatic paradigm shift in Turkish society. Having stressed Ottomanism and Islam as powerful concepts providing ethnic and national unity and cohesion, Erdoğan and his adherents have placed greater efforts to steer the nation towards a new direction distinct from the Kemalist discourse.

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Gabit Zhumatay – contributed to the development of the topic, identifying the goal and objectives of the study, the methodology, methods, and theoretical basis of the study, conducted an extensive review of literature, analyzed the results of the study and their discussion, concluded, and finalized the manuscript.
Yaşar Sari – contributed to outlining the structure of the paper, planning and conducting the study, data analyses, developing the methodology section, reviewing relevant literature and sources, including a critical review of studies in the Turkish language.
Akmaral Yskak – contributed to data collection, their classification and analyses, developed the methodology section, wrote the initial draft, formatted and finalized the manuscript.

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