

# ISLAM AND TURKISH NATIONAL IDENTITY: A REAPPRAISAL

**DOV WAXMAN**

## ABSTRACT

The rise of Islamism in Turkey has been widely viewed as the primary threat to the prevailing official conception of Turkish national identity. According to many observers it lies at the heart of Turkey's identity crisis. This view, however, greatly oversimplifies the relationship between Kemalist nationalism and Islam. We need to radically revise the prevalent understanding of Turkish nationalism as a form of secular nationalism, and the relationship between Turkish national identity and Islam. This article argues that Islam plays a pivotal role in constituting Turkish national identity and that it has gradually been accommodated within the official boundaries of Turkish nationalism. By analyzing the relationship between Islam and Turkish national identity and nationalism, we are able to better assess the so-called Islamist challenge in Turkey. The debate between Islamists and secularists in Turkey is about the importance, not the existence, of Islam in shaping Turkish national identity, and the policy implications of this. The rise of political Islam in Turkey, therefore, does not necessarily signal the demise of Turkish nationalism or the crisis of Turkish national identity.

## KEYWORDS

Turkey, Islam, Islamism, Secularism, Nationalism, National Identity, Identity Crisis, Kemalism.

## 1. Introduction: A Turkish Identity Crisis?

The nature of Turkish national identity, indeed the very existence of Turkish national identity, lies at the heart of discussions of the Turkish Republic both past and present.<sup>1</sup> Domestic and foreign observers have consistently raised the question of Turkey's national identity since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, frequently to the frustration of many Turks in official positions who wish to focus on more concrete and less controversial matters. Despite the objections of Turkish officialdom, however, the identity question has refused to go away. It has reared its troublesome head again and again, representing a persistent theme of journalistic and academic analysis of modern Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Do the Turks really have a uniform national identity, and if so what is it? Do Turks see themselves as members of the West or East? As Europeans or Middle Easterners? As Turks first or Muslims first? Do the Turks really constitute a nation, or are they merely an aggregation of disparate and heterogeneous groups?<sup>3</sup> What place does religion and ethnicity have in Turkish national identity? These are some of the common questions frequently asked by Turks themselves as well as outside observers. Yet they permit no easy answer. Any response invariably raises a host of further questions and often fierce controversy. Such questions do not easily lend themselves to the methodological tools of the social sciences. Measurement and testing appear woefully inadequate in capturing the ambiguous, slippery and shifting nature of national

---

According to the Turkish scholar Berdal Aral, "It is misleading to speak of Turkey as though it represents a single, coherent entity". Berdal Aral, "Turkey's Insecure Identity from the Perspective of Nationalism", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Winter 1997, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>The *Financial Times*, for example, described Turkey as a "country caught between two continents, between two traditions, two trends of history". *Financial Times*, "Survey of Turkey", 23 May 1998, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Aral, *Turkey's Insecure Identity*, p. 79, writes: "Although Turkey has made great strides toward creating a national identity among various ethnic and cultural groups, it is still difficult to speak of a Turkish *nation* that represents some kind of coherent, unified, and homogeneous collectivity of individuals". Emphasis in original.

identity. Studying national identity is, in the words of one practitioner, "a messy business".<sup>4</sup>

The question of Turkish national identity has often been framed in terms of an identity crisis.<sup>5</sup> According to one author: "For the last 250 years the Turkish nation has undergone an identity crisis of tremendous proportions...".<sup>6</sup> Another states that: "Few countries in the modern period have had their identity contested as bitterly and interpreted as variously as the Republic of Turkey".<sup>7</sup> The idea that Turks suffer from an identity crisis has now gained such wide currency in press and academic circles that Turkish leaders regularly address the issue in their speeches and writings. For instance, in a speech in Washington DC on April 27 1999, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel declared:

We have a multiple cultural heritage and in some ways a multiple identity. As individuals, identity cannot be summed up in one word. It is the same for our nation's identity. We certainly do not have, as outsiders sometimes claim, an identity crisis. Turkey and the Turks are very conscious of their identity and heritage. Ordinary people in Turkey do not see themselves as living in a land torn between east and west. They relish variety and they see their country as a land enriched by a multiple heritage.\*\*

---

<sup>4</sup>Michael Barnett, Paper delivered at international conference on "Identities in Transition from War to Peace", The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, December 1, 1999.

<sup>5</sup>See for instance, Dov Waxman, *Turkey's Identity Crises: Domestic Discord and Foreign Policy*, Conflict Studies 311, Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, Leamington Spa., UK, 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Ozay Mehmet, *Islamic Identity and Development: Studies on the Islamic Periphery*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, "Privatizing the Turkish Economy", ch.10, p. 214.

<sup>7</sup>Hakan M. Yavuz, "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism", *Critique*, Spring 1998, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>H. E. Süleyman Demirel, President of the Republic of Turkey, *Speech delivered to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington DC, April 27, 1999. [[http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/demirel](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/demirel.htm)]. htm. See also Turgut Özal, *Turkey in Europe and Europe in Turkey, Ankara*, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupe/eg/cg05/20.htm>].

Nor is this a recent development, simply a product of the general preoccupation with issues of cultural identity influenced by the current postmodernist Zeitgeist. Over twenty years ago, a former Turkish ambassador wrote that: "Today many people wonder whether Turkey is suffering from an identity crisis?"; and another expressed his exasperation at the continued discussion of Turkey's "search for identity", stating: "I think it is time for Turkey to say 'Turkey is Turkey'...Turkey will have much to gain by saying her ambiguous identity is an identity in itself, which is that of a country between two worlds and there are advantages to draw from that"<sup>9</sup>. The rhetorical proclamations and protestations of Turkish officials have, however, failed to satisfy skeptical observers. If anything, rather than putting the issue to rest, their numerous statements have only served to place the issue of Turkish identity higher on the political agenda.

This article will therefore make some observations on the place of Islam in the official construction and articulation of Turkish national identity. It will be argued that Islam plays a pivotal role in constituting Turkish national identity. As well as strongly informing Turkish national identity, Islam has also gradually and, at times, grudgingly, been accommodated within the official boundaries of Turkish nationalism.<sup>10</sup> By analyzing the relationship between Islam and Turkish national identity and nationalism, we would also be able to better assess the so-called Islamist challenge in Turkey. The rise of Islamism in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s has been widely viewed as the primary threat to the prevailing official conception of Turkish national identity. According to many observers it lies at the heart of Turkey's identity crisis.<sup>11</sup> Such an analysis often implicitly posits a dichotomous and essentially adversarial relationship between

---

<sup>9</sup>Seyfi Tashan, "Turkey and the West", *Foreign Policy* (Ankara), Vol. VII, No. 1-2, 1978, p. 7; Miimtaç Soysal, "Discussion on 'Turkey between Europe and the Middle East'", *Foreign Policy* (Ankara), Vol. VIII, No. 3-4, 1980, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>In the words of Hugh Poulton, "Since Atatürk's time, Turkey has evolved into more of a Sunni state, where Sunni Islam is seen by many as an essential component of 'Turkishness'". Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, London, Hurst & Co., 1997, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup>Waxman, *Turkey's Identity Crises*, p. 16.

secular Kemalist nationalism and Islam. The project of Kemalist nation-building is seen as antithetical to Islam, and the fortunes of both are tied up in a "zero-sum game", whereby the success of Kemalist nationalism entails the diminution of Islam, and *vice versa*. Such a characterization, however, greatly over-simplifies the relationship between Kemalist nationalism and Islam. It is the contention of this article that the process that has been occurring has not simply been one of the rise of Islamism and the concomitant decline of Kemalist nationalism. Rather, it is a dual process involving the Islamization of Turkish nationalism, and the nationalization of Islam, or in the words of Turkish scholar Bülent Aras, the "construction of a Turkish style of Islam and the Islamization of the Turkish nationalist ideology".<sup>12</sup> The 1980s only marked the escalation of this process, which was in fact underway from the very beginning of the Turkish Republic.

## 2. Scholarly Treatment of the Construction of Turkish National Identity

Most scholars analyze the development of Turkish national identity within the broader rubric of Turkish modernization, laying their emphasis upon formal, legislative reforms initiated by the so-called "state elite". There exists an overwhelming consensus amongst scholars of modern Turkey that Turkish modernization and nation-building has largely been top-down, state-led, and elitist. Hence, its characterization as a "project" rather than a "process", the latter implying a societally-generated movement.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Bülent Aras and Kemal Kirişçi, "Four Questions on Recent Turkish Politics and Foreign Policy", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1998. Similarly, Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 30, writes that: "Islam has been reinterpreted and reincorporated gradually and subtly into official Turkish nationalism. This process can be seen as an Islamization of Turkish nationalism, but also as the Turkification of the Islamic tradition".

<sup>13</sup>In the words of Ayşe Kadioğlu, "The process of Enlightenment in the West became a project in the context of Turkish modernization". Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s", *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 1, January 1998, p. 6. Similarly, Qağlar Keyder distinguishes between "modernization-from-above" and "modernization as a self-generating societal process".

The "motor" for Turkish modernization, it is agreed, has been the state and its narrow governing clique.<sup>14</sup>

By extension, the state elite are seen as the architects of Turkish national identity. As Hakan Yavuz writes: "The determination of national identity, in particular after 1925, was made strictly at the level of the statist Republican elite and pointedly excluded the mass of society".<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Çağlar Keyder states that: "Turkish nationalism is an extreme example of a situation in which the masses remained silent partners and the modernizing elite did not attempt to accommodate popular sentiment...The masses in Turkey generally remained passive recipients of the nationalist message propounded by the elites"<sup>16</sup>.

The outcome of the "silence of the masses" in articulating Turkish national identity is that it is regarded as a purely alien and artificial construct. "The question of national identity [in Turkey]",

---

According to Keyder, the difference is that in the case of the former, the modernizers are agents who wield state power and maintain their interests. Çağlar Keyder, "Whither the Project of Modernity? Turkey in the 1990s", in Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (eds.), *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1997, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup>Employing Ellen Trimberger's thesis concerning the autonomy of revolutionary groups and its relationship to modernization projects (see *Revolution from Above: Military Bureaucrats and Development in Egypt, Peru, Turkey, and Japan*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Books, 1977), Keyder, *ibid.*, argues that due to the Ottoman state tradition, the absence of large landowners, and the liquidation of the domestic bourgeoisie (due to the Young Turks' wartime economic nationalization policies, the War of Independence, and the expulsion of the Christian minorities from Turkey upon independence), the new bureaucratic state elite enjoyed a large degree of autonomy and faced little domestic opposition. Moreover, the new native bourgeoisie that did emerge was beholden to the bureaucratic elite and the statist economic policies from which it had been created (i.e. "Nationalist developmentalism" - etatism in the interwar years and the import-substitution policy after World War Two).

<sup>15</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup>Keyder, *Whither the Project of Modernity*, p. 43, in fact identifies the gap between the modernizing elites and the "silent masses" as the central axis of modern Turkish history.

writes Ayşe Kadioğlu, "was hardly posed as 'Who are the Turks?', but rather as 'Who and/or how are the Turks going to be?'. The latter question was clearly more prevalent throughout Turkish history indicating the manufactured character of the Republican Turkish identity".<sup>17</sup> According to this argument, the manufactured and artificial character of Turkish national identity accounts for its failure to firmly take root within large sections of Turkish society. Thus, Turkey's supposed identity crisis stems from the manner in which Turkish national identity was constructed. The Republican state elite's condescending and insensitive stance towards popular identifications and sentiment is held to be responsible for the identity crisis that has continued to afflict Turkey. "Republican Turkish identity" was too narrowly-based, too synthetic, too superficial, to provide a viable and sustainable national identity for the citizens of the new Turkish republic.<sup>18</sup>

This argument however should not be carried too far. Although the state elite have consistently been the primary agents in the construction of Turkish national identity, they have nonetheless had to pay attention to the characteristics of the Republic's population. Turkish national identity, like all national identities, could not be constructed entirely in a vacuum, so to speak, whatever the wishes of the state elite might have been. The Turkish state elite necessarily had to fashion the new Turkish national identity in relation to their society. Of course, this does not mean that they willingly accommodated the needs and aspirations of Turkish society in all its diversity. Quite the contrary, their self-declared mission was to revolutionize the society for the good of

---

<sup>17</sup>Ayşe Kadioğlu, "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity", in Sylvia Kedourie (ed.), *Turkey: Identity, Democracy, Politics*, London, Frank Cass, 1998, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup>As Keyder, *Whither the Project of Modernity?*, p. 45, writes: "The main problem with Turkish nationalist historiography was that it did not result from a negotiation between what the nationalist elites were trying to achieve and what could have motivated the masses to participate, nor did it come to terms with the events that loomed largest in the experience of the participants", i.e. the expulsion and exchange of the Greek and Armenian subjects of the empire. "Thus it became possible for the nationalist elites to treat the construction of history and national identity in an entirely instrumental fashion; the version they eventually settled on was woefully deficient in its accommodation of popular elements."

the people. Yet they did not trust Turkish society to take part in its own revolution. Instead they favored a paternalistic state, in which authoritarianism was exercised in the name of future democracy. "The function of the Kemalist state was not that of an arbiter between conflicting classes and other social groups; its main function was to formulate and implement 'correct' political decisions for the benefit of the nation as a whole".<sup>19</sup>

The state was thus endowed with the task of protecting the envisaged ideal "civilized" nation against the encroachments and assertions of the "barbarians" within. "The Republican state which fostered a Jacobin mentality, led to the creation of an official, monolithic, absolute Turkish identity either by suppressing or by ignoring the multiple identities that came to be imprisoned in the periphery".<sup>20</sup> But these multiple identities refused to go away, the real people could not be banished and the state elite has been continually confronted with popular reaction, forcing them to make accommodations to democratic and cultural aspirations. Turkish national identity is an outcome of these accommodations, a product of the perpetual negotiations between the state and society. This is most clearly apparent when one looks at Islam's role in the construction and articulation of Turkish national identity.

### 3. **Kemalist Nationalism, Islam and Turkish National Identity**

In the eyes of many observers of the Turkish Republic, both past and present, Kemalism was hostile to Islam and sought to replace the religious identification hitherto prevalent amongst the Turkish population with a national identification. Perceiving Islam as a reactionary and potentially threatening force which could obstruct the modernization and nation-building building they envisaged for the new Turkish Republic, the Kemalists allegedly sought to banish Islam from the public sphere and displace it in the private sphere through an attachment to secular Turkish nationalism. The new Turkish national identity they sought to

---

<sup>19</sup>Aral, *Turkey's Insecure Identity*, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup>Kadioglu, *The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism*, p. 192.



constructing Turkish national identity, the Kemalists incorporated Islamic elements creating a nationalized Islam.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that Islam informed Turkish national identity even during the heyday of Kemalism (1923-1950) is revealed in Republican regulations concerning immigration and naturalization which reflected the close association between Islam and Republican national identity. Article 4 of the Law of Settlement, for instance, stated that "only those who belong to Turkish ethnicity and culture" would be permitted to settle permanently in Turkey. The government regarded Albanians, Bosnians, Torbes, Pomaks, and Montenegrin Muslims as culturally "Turks" and helped them re-settle in Turkey. By contrast, the Gagauz Turks of Moldovo, who had converted to Orthodox Christianity, were not considered to be culturally Turkish. As Ali Haydar, a prominent exponent of secular Turkish nationalism, wrote in 1926, "it is impossible to make non-Muslims sincere Turkish citizens".<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the clearest indication of Islam's role in constituting Turkish national identity was the massive "population exchange" between Turkey and Greece carried out from 1923 to 1930 involving almost two million people. Religion, rather than ethnicity or language, was the criterion for differentiating populations and hence determining their future nationality. "What took place", writes Bernard Lewis, "was not an exchange of Greeks and Turks, but rather an exchange of Greek Orthodox Christians and Ottoman Muslims. A Western observer, accustomed to a different system of social and national classification, might even conclude that this was no repatriation at all, but two deportations into exile of Christian Turks to Greece, and of Muslim Greeks to Turkey".<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to Kemal Karpat, "A student of contemporary Turkish culture and society is bound to conclude that the Turkish nation is

---

<sup>23</sup>In pursuit of this aim Mustafa Kemal ordered the call to prayer in all mosques to be in Turkish, not Arabic, and wanted the Koran to be translated into Turkish (funds for the latter were voted by the National Assembly in 1926 although the project ultimately failed). Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup>Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, second edition, 1968, p. 355.

in some ways an extension of the Muslim nation that emerged out of the Muslim millet in the nineteenth century".<sup>26</sup>

Non-Muslim minorities in the Republic, although accorded special status under the terms of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, often faced discrimination and prejudice.<sup>27</sup> The most notorious example of official discrimination against non-Muslim citizens of the Republic was the Capital Tax of 11 November 1942. Religion and ethnicity were the criteria that determined how much tax a person had to pay, with non-Muslims paying up to ten times as much as Muslims. Defaulters, almost all of whom were Greeks, Jews and Armenians, were deported to labor camps where conditions were harsh and mortality rates high. This measure came amidst a sharp rise in anti-Semitic and anti-minority feeling in Turkey during the period 1941-1943.<sup>28</sup> "At a fundamental level, then, Turkish identity, even during the Republican period could not escape its religious basis".<sup>29</sup> This continued and intensified with the

---

<sup>26</sup>Kemal Karpat, "The Ottoman Ethnic and Confessional Legacy in the Middle East", in Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich (eds.), *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1988, ch. 3, pp. 51-52.

<sup>27</sup>Prejudice against non-Muslim Turks continues to this day in Turkey. For instance, in a study carried out in 1999, of more than 2000 respondents from different regions of Turkey revealed high levels of prejudice by Turks against Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Gypsies. Another study found that 61 percent of respondents would not want to have Christian neighbors. Cited in Nida Bikmen, *National Identity and Ethnic Prejudice in a Turkish Sample*, unpublished thesis, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 1999, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup>Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent*, pp. 117-119. Moreover, official anti-Semitic and anti-minority policies were not limited to this short period. During the preceding decade of the 1930s, a number of anti-Jewish measures were introduced and an anti-Jewish campaign was orchestrated by the Turkish press. For example, a 1934 Law of Settlement (law 2510) regulating the distribution and settlement of Turkey's population, forced the removal of the historic Jewish communities of Edirne and the Straits zone. These instances contradict the common claim made by Turkish officials to Jewish and Israeli audiences that there has never been anti-Semitism in the history of the Turkish Republic or its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Such instances of anti-Semitism, however, pall in comparison to those occurring in continental Europe at the time.

<sup>29</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 26.

establishment of multiparty democracy after World War II. Turkish politicians, under the pressure to compete for votes, made further concessions to the religious masses and increasingly drew upon Islamic symbols and rhetoric in mobilizing the Turkish electorate. Thus, according to one scholar of Turkish nationalism: "In the decades after 1950, Sunni Islam increasingly became integrated into the state nationalist ideology".<sup>30</sup>

The foregoing analysis, therefore, suggests that we need to radically revise the prevalent understanding of Turkish nationalism as a form of secular nationalism, and the relationship between Turkish national identity and Islam.<sup>31</sup> Scholarly accounts of modern Turkey frequently make references to secular Turkish nationalism and posit an antagonistic relationship between Islam and Turkish nationalism and national identity. Metin Heper, for instance, writes that: "...through the mass media, People's Houses (1932-54), flag saluting, national anthem singing, state parades and the like, there has been a continuing and consistent socialization aimed at producing a Turkish rather than a Muslim identity".<sup>32</sup> The implication here is that the construction of a Turkish identity undermined and displaced Muslim identities, the two identities being antagonistic and thus unable to co-exist. At the root of such postulated antagonism lies the different communities to which Islam and nationalism appeal. Whereas nationalism regards the nation as the ideal form of social and political community, and the

---

<sup>30</sup>Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent*, p. 318.

<sup>31</sup>We should also revise how we understand secularism, specifically by contextualizing and historicizing the concept. As Andrew Davison writes: "What is secular, what may be meant by secularism and its different modes in modernity, and, consequently, in the practices, relations, and institutions associated with secularism are historically contested and various". Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup>Metin Heper, "Political Culture as a Dimension of Compatibility", in Metin Heper, Ayşe Öncü and Heinz Kramer (eds.), *Turkey and the West: Changing Political and Cultural Identities*, London, New York, I. B. Tauris & Co., 1993, ch.1, p. 9. Heper, pp. 9-10, also cites a 1960s survey of workers in a textile factory in Izmir, in which 50.3 percent answered "Turks" and only 37.5 percent answered "Muslims" in response to the question "How do you see yourselves?".

basis of political legitimacy; Islam appeals to the transnational community of the Islamic faithful (the Umma) and conceives of it as the ideal form of social, political and religious community. Nationalism confers political legitimacy upon the national community, whilst Islam confers political legitimacy upon the religious community. In short, Islam's transnational vision contradicts nationalism's national vision.

This argument, however, relies upon an "Orientalist" understanding of Islam which presents it as an essentially unchanging, static, body of ideas and practices. The transnationalism of Islam is rooted in its doctrinal core; its hostility to nationalism is thus a priori, inherent in its very nature. It depicts Islamic identity as singular, monolithic and inflexible, unable to accommodate nationalist demands and aspirations. This "Orientalist" reading of Islam has been largely discredited due to the numerous critiques leveled at it over the years. It is not necessary to re-hash these critiques here, suffice to say that Islam and Islamic identity cannot be treated in such a simplistic and reductionist manner, instead they must be contextualized and historicized. As Yavuz argues, "the significance of Islamic political consciousness, as a form of macro-identity, must be understood as a contextual, relational, and situational phenomenon".<sup>33</sup> Islamic identity, like all identities, is fluid, flexible, and subject to constant revision.<sup>34</sup> It does not necessarily "crowd out" other identities, instead, Islamic identity "can function separately or provide a framework for the negotiation of other identities".<sup>35</sup> The boundaries between Islamic identity and national and/or ethnic identities, therefore, are not fixed but flexible. As such, Islamic identity can often inform and promote nationalism and national identity. Indeed, Islamic identity has been frequently nationalized.

---

<sup>33</sup>Hakan M. Yavuz, "The Patterns of Political Islamic Identity: Dynamics of National and Transnational Loyalties and Identities", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1995, p. 342.

<sup>34</sup>An Islamic political identity in Turkey is far from monolithic, instead it is being continually contested by various actors. Yavuz states that, "The process of forming an Islamic political identity has become a terrain for competition among many diverse Sufi orders, Islamic intellectual circles, and institutions". Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup>Yavuz, *The Patterns of Political Islamic Identity*, p. 346.

This is certainly the case with Turkish national identity. There is a great degree of fluidity between Islamic and nationalist identities in Turkey.<sup>36</sup> The categories of Islam and the Turkish nation are not mutually exclusive, they often overlap in practice. Thus Bernard Lewis concluded over thirty years ago in his now classic text, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, "After a century of Westernization, Turkey has undergone immense changes...But the deepest Islamic roots of Turkish life and culture are still alive, and the ultimate identity of Turk and Muslim in Turkey is still unchallenged".<sup>37</sup> Turkish scholar Ilter Turan concurs with this view in his analysis of the role of Islam in Turkey's political culture. Posing the question: "Has a political community emerged in Turkey, with members whose religious characteristics in no way affect their membership?"; he answers that whilst this is indeed the case at the official legal level, at the behavioral level it is not. Non-Muslims, Turan claims, are usually referred to as "Turkish citizens" or a "minority person", but not as a "Turk". According to Turan: "Turk<sup>1</sup> designates an ethno-religious characteristic of the political community, an attribute which is not found among some of the citizens, albeit very few".<sup>38</sup> Islam is thus a central component in the definition of a "Turk".

This fact has been increasingly recognized in Turkey in recent decades. A major reason for this has been the changing composition of the Turkish elite, and specifically the emergence of a more Islamically-oriented elite. This, in turn, was the result of the massive expansion of religious education in Turkey since the 1970s. For instance, there were 72 *imam-hatip* schools in 1970,

---

<sup>36</sup>Chris Houston, "Islamic Solutions to the Kurdish Problem: Late Rendezvous or Illegitimate Shortcut?", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol. 16, Spring 1997, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, p. 424.

<sup>38</sup>Ilter Turan, "Religion and Political Culture in Turkey", in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Islam in Modern Turkey: Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State*, London and New York, I. B. Tauris & Co., 1991, ch. 2, pp. 37-38. Moreover, Turan, p. 39, claims that although only Muslims are designated Turks, this is irrespective of their religiosity: "Ironically, an agnostic or an atheist may qualify as a 'Muslim' if he is of an 'Islamic' background".

374 in 1980, and 389 in 1992.<sup>39</sup> By 1997, there were 561 *imam-hatip* schools with 492,809 students.<sup>40</sup> The vast majority of the graduates of these schools did not go on to become *imams* or *hatips*, instead many went on to study at university. The parallel expansion of higher education during this time therefore produced increasing numbers of religiously-oriented university students, especially in the fields of political science and public administration. For instance, in 1987, 40 per cent of Ankara University intakes for public administration department were graduates from *imam-hatip* schools. By 1992, this figure had risen to an astonishing 60 per cent.<sup>41</sup> Many of the graduates of *imam-hatip* schools, most of whom came from middle or lower class families, thus increasingly entered the state bureaucracy. "As a result of the entry of these new graduates, the Turkish secular elite lost its former dominance and coherence in political affairs".<sup>42</sup>

Many also went on to attain political power as Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s entering the Islamist Welfare Party (e.g. the mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayip Erdoğan), as well as the officially secular center-right parties, the Motherland Party and the True Path Party.<sup>43</sup> They also entered the ranks of business, becoming the so-called "Anatolian tigers" of the late 1980s and 1990s, and forming on May 5, 1990, the Association of the Independent Industrialists

---

<sup>39</sup>Sami Zubaida, "Turkish Islam and National Identity", *Middle East Report*, April-June, 1996, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 32. Of these 561 schools, only 37 had been funded by the state, suggesting the effective retreat of the state in the crucial field of religious education. The state did however prevent a further 200 privately-funded *imam-hatip* schools from opening.

<sup>41</sup>Jeremy Salt, "Nationalism and the Rise of Muslim Sentiment in Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, January 1995, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup>The True Path Party and the Motherland Party both contain significant Islamist elements, including deputies in parliament. Thus it would be wrong to regard the Welfare Party as the sole political representative of Turkey's Islamists. As Zubaida writes: "The RP, while an openly Islamist party, does not enjoy a monopoly on Islam in the political arena". Zubaida, *Turkish Islam and National Identity*, p. 11.

and Businessmen (MUSIAD).<sup>44</sup> Given the consistently dominant role played by elites, throughout the Turkish Republic as well the Ottoman Empire, the significance of this development can hardly be overestimated. In particular, since elites have been the primary articulators of Turkish national identity, the diversification of the Turkish elite had a profound effect upon Turkish national identity. The gradual infiltration of the new more Islamically-oriented elite into the higher echelons of government, economy, and culture influenced not only state policies, but also the articulation of Turkish national identity. According to Yavuz: "This group is pivotal in the re-examination of the Republican legacy and in the construction of a new Ottoman-Islamic identity".<sup>45</sup> In the post-1980 period, therefore, a new discourse emerged among the Turkish elite, which placed greater reference on Turkey's Muslim character. The new discourse of the Turkish elite departed from their earlier "Kemalist-secular" discourse in its emphasis upon the Islamic identity of the Turks and the significance of religious values.

Turgut Özal, as prime minister (1983-1991) and later president (1991-1993), until his sudden death, epitomized the new Islamically-oriented elite which emerged in Turkey during the 1980s. Özal was instrumental in forging many of the political, economic and cultural changes of the decade.<sup>46</sup> Özal explicitly emphasized Islam as an integral element of Turkish national identity. As he stated:

---

<sup>44</sup>The Association of the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen (MUSIAD) was started by a group of young pro-Islamic businessmen in Istanbul. The organization's membership reached 400 in 1991, 1700 by 1993, and 3000 in 1998. Its members' companies annual revenue in 1998 was US\$2.79 billion. It thus represents an increasingly powerful pressure group and counterweight to the secular-minded Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD). Nilüfer Narh, "The Rise of the Islamist Movement in Turkey", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1999.

<sup>45</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup>It should be pointed out that not all of these changes were good. During the 1980s, as a result of Özal's economic liberalization policy, the unemployment rate increased, income differentials widened, and the lower classes share of GNP significantly declined.

What holds together, or rather brings together, our unity and our cohesiveness is the fact that we are all citizens of the Turkish Republic. This is the first point. Everybody who lives in this land, everybody who was born here and everybody within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic who is a citizen of this country is a first-class citizen of this country with no distinction being made. Our state is secular. But what holds our nation together, what serves in a most powerful way in our national cohesiveness and what plays the essential role is Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Özal attempted to personify the Turkish identity he sought to promote amongst the population:

...Özal presented a public image of a statesman who was both a dedicated Muslim and a member of the modern world, proving that these identities are not mutually exclusive. We might understand this as an attempt to prove to the subjects of the Turkish Kemalist state that there is no necessary contradiction between being a Muslim and a subject of the secular republic, or between being a Muslim and having a positive attitude towards modern, i.e. Westernized life.<sup>48</sup>

This personal message was clearly conveyed by Özal when he wrote in his book *Turkey in Europe and Europe in Turkey*:

The Turk is aware that faith in itself does not affect secularism, does not prevent him from being rational. In everyday life, there is no difference in this respect between a European Christian and a Turkish Muslim. A synthesis has been realized between the West and Islam. This synthesis has ended the identity crisis of the Turk. I am a believer and open to all kinds of innovations. Not having a problem of identity, I feel no need to defend my own culture, nor to attach myself to an ideology or an extremist nationalism.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in *Milliyet*, 30 January 1989.

<sup>48</sup>Günter Seufert and Petra Weyland, "National Events and the Struggle for the Fixity of Meaning: A Comparison of the Symbolic Dimensions of the Funeral Services for Atatürk and Özal", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Fall 1994, Vol. 11, p. 95.

<sup>49</sup>Turgut Özal, *Turkey in Europe and Europe in Turkey*. Quoted in Nicole and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: A History of Modern Turkey*, Woodstock and New York, The Overlook Press, 1997, pp. 170-171.

The increased emphasis upon Islam as a central component of Turkish national identity, however, was not solely the product of Turgut Özal or the new Islamically-oriented elite of which he was a member. In fact, it was initially advanced in the beginning of the 1980s by that supposed bastion of Kemalist secularism, the Turkish military. In the wake of the September 1980 military coup, which brought to an end a decade of ideological polarization and rising political violence, the military junta advocated what was termed the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis", which aimed at synthesizing Islam and Turkish nationalism, and promoting a "state-centered Turkish-Islamic consciousness".<sup>50</sup> As Yavuz argues, "Through Islamization of society, the coup leaders sought to engineer a new form of depoliticized Turkish-Islamic culture that would reunify society...".<sup>51</sup> The "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" was first formulated in the early 1970s by a group of right-wing Turkish intellectuals who were members of The Hearth of the Enlightened (*Aydımlar Ocagi*) organization formed on 14 May 1970.<sup>52</sup> Concerned about the spread of left-wing ideologies in Turkey, especially in universities, they sought to counteract this trend by strengthening right-wing nationalism.<sup>53</sup> Since Turkey was an overwhelmingly Muslim country, they believed that this could be accomplished through reasserting the role of Islam in the secular Turkish Republic, and fusing it with Turkish nationalism. The synthesis "aimed at an authoritarian but not an Islamic state where religion was seen as the essence of culture and social control, and should thus be fostered in the education system but not politicized".<sup>54</sup> This aim was later adopted by the leaders of the 1980 military coup. In order to propagate the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis", they appointed leading members of The Hearth of the Enlightened to key positions in the state's cultural and educational establishment

---

<sup>50</sup>Hakan M. Yavuz, "Political Islam and the Welfare (*Refah*) Party in Turkey", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, October 1997, p. 68.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup>This organization was itself an extension of *The Club of the Enlightened* established by right-wing intellectuals in May 1962 in the more liberal climate following the 1960 coup. See Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent*, pp. 179-181.

<sup>53</sup>They were thus natural supporters of Alparslan Türkeş's Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and its brand of right-wing nationalism. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 184.

(such as in the Turkish Radio and Television authority - TRT, the Board of Higher Education Council and the Education Ministry).

Reacting to the penetration of Marxism in university campuses through the 1960s and 1970s, and the growth of religious education outside the state's control, education was the primary sphere in which the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" was expounded.<sup>55</sup> In a report prepared for the military regime in 1983, the State Planning Organization suggested the reintegration of Islamic values into public education in order to strengthen national unity.<sup>56</sup> Turkey's military rulers, therefore, made religious education compulsory in elementary and secondary schools, enshrining it in the new Turkish constitution of 1982.<sup>57</sup> By actively promoting the study of Islam in the educational system, the military regime aimed to ensure state control over Islamic education. In this way, Turkish youth would learn "official Islam" rather than the "reactionary", "fundamentalist" variety. Moreover, in an effort to counter the numerous social, economic, political and ethnic divisions that appeared during the 1960s and 1970s, "official Islam" stressed Islam as the common denominator among the various groups in the Turkish nation. Thus, it was the state elite and state policy that helped bring about the shift of emphasis upon Islam as a central element of Turkish national identity. As such, "the recognition of Islam as an important part of national Turkish ideology has planted the seeds for further Islamisation".<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>For an outline of the educational syllabus introduced by the military regime see *Ibid.*, pp. 182-184.

<sup>56</sup>Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 29.

<sup>57</sup>According to Article 24, education in religion "shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and moral education shall be compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence or even for partially basing the fundamental social, economic, political and legal order of the State on religious tenets". Quoted in Salt, *Nationalism and the Rise of Muslim Sentiment in Turkey*, p. 16.

<sup>58</sup>Hakan M. Yavuz, "Turkey's 'Imagined Enemies': Kurds and Islamists", *The World Today*, Vol. 52, No. 4, April 1996, p. 99. Yavuz also writes that: "In effect, the military laid the seeds for the rise of Refah". See Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 32.

The rise of political Islam in Turkey through the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, does not necessarily signal the demise of Turkish nationalism or the crisis of Turkish national identity. If anything, it testifies to the resilience of nationalism in Turkey in the face of severe social, economic, and political strains. The "nation" as the appropriate basis upon which to establish a political community is now widely accepted in Turkish society. In this sense, Turkish nationalism has been successful in inculcating the nation as the principal locus of collective political identification.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Sunni Islam has become an important component of Turkish nationalism.<sup>60</sup> It is for this reason that, "probably a majority of Turks do not perceive a contradiction between Islam and their attachment to Kemalist symbols, viewing both as integral to national identity".<sup>61</sup> Even those Turks who have supported political Islam in Turkey, in the form of the National Salvation Party, and its successors the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party, no doubt adhere to the values of Turkish nationalism. Thus, according to one survey, 41 per cent of Welfare Party voters described themselves in Kemalist terms as *laik* (secular), and regarded Atatürk as the greatest man of all time, even before the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, even the foremost spokesman of political Islam in Turkey, Necmettin Erbakan, could be regarded as Turkish nationalist. In his political speeches, Erbakan regularly stressed the notions of "national unity" and a "powerful state with religious society".<sup>63</sup> The election manifestos of Erbakan's National Salvation Party frequently asserted that the party defended Turkey's national interests and represented the "national view".<sup>64</sup> Thus, one Turkish

---

<sup>59</sup>Turan, *Religion and Political Culture in Turkey*, p. 38.

<sup>60</sup>Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>61</sup>Zubaida, *Turkish Islam and National Identity*, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup>Cited in *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup>Yavuz, *Political Islam and the Welfare (Refah) Party in Turkey*, p. 76.

<sup>64</sup>For example, in its 1973 general election party platform, the NSP declared: "[The] NSP is against Turkey's participation in the Common Market. NSP complains to the nation that those parties which had said 'yes' to this union are running counter to national interests. Against such an attempt which will degenerate our national and moral values, destroy our national industry, and cause our nation to dissolve in a cosmopolitan and common medium by violating the principle of national sovereignty in

observer at the time wrote: "...the description by the NSP of its policies as the 'national view' (*jnilli görüş*), though doubtless to a large extent merely lip-service to secular sentiment and laws, seems partly to indicate the success of nationalism in dominating the Turkish scene".<sup>65</sup> More recently, at the Welfare Party's Fifth Convention in 1997, Erbakan declared the party's foreign policy goal as the "creation of the Greater Turkey just as the Ottomans did".<sup>66</sup> Thus, according to Zubaida, "Turkey's brand of Islamist ideology challenges the secularist components and the European identification of Kemalism, historically the dominant form of Turkish nationalism, but retains the central core of Turkish nationalism and statism".<sup>67</sup> In many ways, therefore, the discourse of Erbakan and the National Salvation Party/Welfare Party/Virtue Party represents the culmination of the process of the nationalization of Islam and the Islamization of nationalism in Turkey.<sup>68</sup>

---

the political field, NSP, representing the national point of view, will accomplish its duty and free our nation's future from these vapid parties". In "Foreign Policy Abstracts From The 1973 Election Platforms of the Turkish Political Parties", *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, Vol. XIII, 1973, pp. 164-165.

<sup>65</sup>Sina Akşin, "Turkish Nationalism Today", *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, Vol. XVI, 1976, pp. 22.

<sup>66</sup>Quoted in Yavuz, *Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux*, p. 23.

<sup>67</sup>Zubaida, *Turkish Islam and National Identity*, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup>It should be noted that Erbakan is not the leader of the Virtue Party, since he was banned from active politics following the closure of the Welfare Party in January 1998 by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that it violated the principles of secularism and the law of the political parties. The Virtue Party (FP) was founded on December 17, 1997 by 33 former Welfare Party deputies under the leadership of Recai Kutan. The leadership of the Virtue Party has been described as "socially conservative, culturally nationalistic, free-market oriented, not anti-Western, and is seeking to reinvent a centrist image for the VP". Hakan M. Yavuz, "Search for a New Social Contract in Turkey: Fethullah Giilen, the Virtue Party and the Kurds", *SAIS Review: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1999, p. 127.

#### **4. Conclusion: A Question of Emphasis**

Despite the persistent tensions and conflicts between secularists and Islamists in Turkey, the vast majority within both camps share a belief that Islam constitutes an essential aspect of "Turkishness". For both, to be a Turk basically means being a Muslim. Given this underlying broad consensus concerning the Islamic component of Turkish national identity, does this mean that we should dismiss all the talk about an identity debate in Turkey as simply arising from a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of Turkish nationalism and national identity? This would be a hasty conclusion. Instead, we must reformulate the nature of the identity debate between Islamists and secularists in Turkey. It is often crudely portrayed as involving a competition between Turkish national identity and Islamic identity. This article has disputed this simplistic dichotomy, pointing to the coexistence and co-mingling of the two identities. Rather, the debate concerns the relative salience of Islam within Turkish national identity and the political implications that follow from this. Islamists prioritize Islam within their conception of Turkish national identity, and argue that the primarily Islamic nature of Turkish identity should be given concrete political and social expression. For secularists, on the other hand, Islam is an important, but by no means, exclusive source of Turkish national identity. Islam is just one element amongst others that informs Turkish national identity, and it is not necessarily the most important; many secularists would no doubt prefer to emphasize the European element in Turkish national identity. Moreover, secularists argue that the Islamic element of Turkish identity should be expressed within the private rather than the public sphere.

In short, the identity debate between Islamists and secularists underway in Turkey is about the importance, not the existence, of Islam in shaping Turkish national identity, and the policy implications of this. As such, it is essentially a question of emphasis; a question perhaps less dramatic, but certainly no less consequential for the future of Turkey and its citizens.

Show more. Advanced search. Islam and turkish national identity : a reappraisal. Dov Waxman. Published: 1 January 2000. by Ankara University. in Milletleraras. Milletleraras pp 1-7; doi:10.1501/intrel\_0000000013. Publisher Website. Google Scholar. Keywords: reappraisal / Turkish National Identity / Islam and Turkish National.