

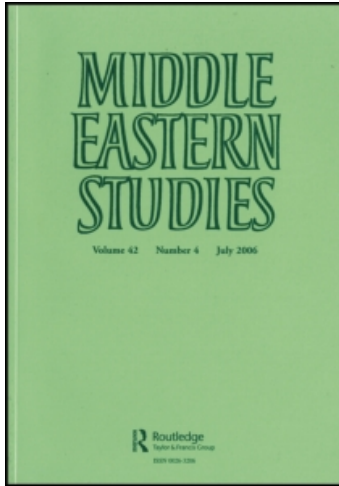
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Persistence of the Islamic *Millet* as an Ottoman Legacy: Mono-Religious and Anti-Ethnic Definition of Turkish Nationhood

SENER AKTURK

The classical view of the definition of Turkish nationhood after the founding of the Republic in 1923 is that this definition is civic, territorial, and explicitly non-ethnic, denoting a bond of constitutional citizenship à la France, in conscious opposition to ethnic definitions of nationhood commonly associated with Germany, both intellectually and in historical practice.¹ However, recent scholarship on the subject of Turkish nationhood sharply contradicts this view. A series of books and articles in the last two decades have argued that the official policies of the Turkish state in many areas, including immigration, taxation, and employment, reveal a thinly-disguised ethno-racial understanding of the nation, especially in the early Republican period.² The literature that charts the transition from Ottoman to Turkish identity also implicitly concurs with the view that ethnic affinity assumed a central role in Turkey that it did not have in the Ottoman Empire.³ Some other scholars, uncomfortable with the dichotomy of civic and ethnic nationhood, and unable to fit Turkey into either category, have created new categories (e.g. ‘modernist nationalism’) on the basis of the Turkish experience.⁴

In this article, I argue that both the classical views, which identify territoriality as the basic parameter of Turkish nationhood, and the critical views, which identify ethnic origin as the basic parameter of Turkish nationhood, are inaccurate. Instead, official state policies strongly suggest that Islamic background, rather than ethnic origin or residence, defines the limits of Turkish nationhood. Where Turkey borders other Muslim countries to the east and to the south, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan, the criteria for inclusion/exclusion is again not ethnic, but rather linguistic (Turkish speaker) and sectarian (Sunni Islam). As a result, ‘ethnic origin’ is conspicuous for its absence as a criterion or parameter of Turkish nationhood. In this respect, there is a striking continuity between the Islamic *millet* (religious community) in the Ottoman Empire and the understanding of the modern Turkish *millet* (revealingly, *millet* is the most widely used Turkish word for *nation*) after the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This somewhat ironic finding in the case of adamantly secular Turkey might be comparable to the interplay between ethnicity and religion in most other post-Ottoman Islamic Middle Eastern and North African

countries, where Islamic heritage often trumps ethnicity as a criterion and parameter of nationhood.

The article proceeds as follows: first, the classical (and official) view of a territorially defined, civic Turkish nationhood is reviewed. To demonstrate how genuinely this civic-territorial official definition was taken to be, I focus on the attempt of Turkish Jews, encouraged by the civic and territorial formulation of Turkish nationhood found in the constitution and other key documents, to seek full inclusion in the new Turkish Republic.

Second, the many criticisms of the classical view are outlined. These criticisms are divided into specific policies seen as ‘instances of discrimination’, such as the Wealth Tax, and systematic discrimination at a more general level, such as discrimination in immigration and civil service employment. I emphasize that the policies these critics discuss are mostly cases of official discrimination against non-Muslims, and do not indicate any tangible preference for ethnic Turks against Muslims from all other ethnic categories. I further note that individuals of Muslim ethnic minority background are not codified and identified in a way that allows for systematic official discrimination. In order to demonstrate my argument about the primacy of religion over ethnicity, I critically review immigration policies, which are seen as central policies in defining nationhood, and also policies where most critical scholarship attributed mono-ethnic and racial motives to the Turkish state.

After demonstrating the primacy of religious over ethnic categories, I offer an explanation of why religion trumps ethnicity. I argue that the multi-ethnic Muslim *millet* (‘nation of Islam’), which existed as a legal and social category in the Ottoman Empire for 470 years (1453–1923), persisted in the Republic of Turkey as the unofficial definition of Turkish nationhood, but the discursive legitimation of this definition shifted with the establishment of the Republic from religious affiliation per se to participation in the War of Liberation as a Muslim front against non-Muslim enemies. The border between self and other in the constitution of Turkish nationhood is thus entrenched along the fault lines of religious heritage.

Finally, I discuss how the Ottoman legacy of defining communal and personal identity on the basis of religious affiliation structures the politics of ethnic recognition in Turkey today. I outline the specific challenges as well as the opportunities the Ottoman legacy poses for an inclusive, non-ethnic, civic formulation of Turkish identity. Apart from many primary and secondary sources ranging from parliamentary proceedings and newspapers to academic books and articles, I also use 12 interviews that I conducted between October and December 2007 in Ankara and Istanbul, with leading politicians and intellectuals of different ideological persuasions who are involved in ethnic politics in Turkey.⁵

What I call the classical view of Turkish nationhood takes at face value the official definition of a Turk as it is laid out in the constitution and other formal legal texts, along with the aphorisms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and maintains that Turkishness is territorially-defined, civic, and explicitly non-ethnic.

The Ottoman or Kemalist notion of citizenship had never been ethnic.... [N]ationalism/patriotism remained inclusive – territorial rather than ethnic. Kemal’s aphorism of 1933 (‘Happy is he who calls himself a Turk’) opposed the idea of birth, blood, or ethnicity, an idea that was popular among the fascist

regimes in Germany and Italy. Anyone who lived within the borders of the new Turkey could call himself a 'Turk'. That is how patriots interpreted *milliyetçilik* (patriotism/nationalism).⁶

As the quote above testifies, the official and formal legal definition of Turkish nationhood and nationalism is strictly territorial, civic, and non-ethnic. Such a definition of Turkish nationhood fits well with the view that sees the emergence of the Turkish Republic as ushering in the founding of a new, modern society of equal citizens, independent of ethnic, religious, sectarian, and other ascriptive identities.⁷ Unlike the critical view which perceives the Ottoman Empire as more inclusive of and receptive to ethnic and religious diversity,⁸ this modernization view sees Republican Turkey as *more*, not less, tolerant of diversity, since it is assumed that the principle of secularism in the Republic did away with the legal categories of religiously-defined *millets*, and deemed all subjects equal citizens regardless of religious affiliation. The Republic did away with the primacy of religious affiliation as the organizing principle and pillar of society as was the case in the Ottoman Empire, removing the barriers between various religiously-defined *millets* and merging them together into a modern, secular Turkish nation. Like many of Atatürk's reforms, Kemalists saw the changes in the conceptualization of Turkish citizenship and nationhood ushered in by secularization in the same light as the transformations that France underwent as a result of the French Revolution. Atatürk took France more than any other country as the model for the new Turkish Republic, but to what extent does/did Turkey's definition of nationhood resemble the civic-territorial-linguistic model attributed to France?⁹

Jewish citizens of Turkey were perfectly positioned to test the limits of Turkish nationhood after the transition to a secular republic. Just as the emancipation of Jews became one of the hallmarks of the French Revolution, could the successful acceptance of Jews into the new Turkish nation demonstrate the progressive nature of the Turkish Revolution? The Kemalist reformulation of Turkish nationhood seems to have made a great, and in the beginning an overwhelmingly positive, impression on Turkish Jews. In fact, Moiz Kohen (Moshe Cohen), a Turkish Jew who later took the Turkic name Munis Tekinalp, was one of the first people to try to systematize Atatürk's ideas as an ideology ('Kemalism') in his book *Le Kemalisme*, published first in French and later in Turkish.¹⁰ Tekinalp was a Turkish nationalist and Kemalist who urged the Jewish community to learn Turkish and to assimilate into the new secular republican national culture, while contributing to the construction of the new nation as such.¹¹ Abraham Galante was another prominent Turkish Jew, and a member of the parliament in the early republican period, who participated in the construction of Turkish nationhood under Atatürk.

Already at the end of the nineteenth century, famous Ottoman scholars such as Şemsettin Sami, Hüseyin Cahit, and Cami Bey (Baykurt) made the bold assertion that, except for Christians living in coastal city centres such as Izmir in the West, the Christian population of Anatolia was racially Turkish.¹² They tended to define Turkishness through language rather than religion. The main distinction they made was a geographic one: between coastal cities and the inner regions of Anatolia.¹³ Carried to its logical conclusion, such a definition of Turkishness could be the

foundation of a geographically compact ethnic Turkish state of Christians and Muslims in Anatolia.

The Turkish-speaking Christians of Central Anatolia, who were living around Karaman, Konya, Nevsehir, which corresponded to the ancient region of Capadocia, were an object of special attention by the political leadership and intellectuals during Turkey's War of Liberation (1919–22). Mustafa Kemal actively sought and gained their support for the struggle against the Greek invasion of Anatolia. He also encouraged and supported the establishment and activities of the Turkish Orthodox Church, established in Kayseri in 1921 by Papa Eftim, a pastor from Yozgat. In short, the view that most Christians of Central Anatolia were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally Turkish, as well as loyal supporters of the struggle for the liberation of Anatolia from Greek and other Christian European invaders, was widely accepted by the leadership of the Turkish resistance and by its leader, Mustafa Kemal.

A stunning confirmation of the primacy of religion over ethnicity in the constitution of Turkish nationhood came in 1924, when the exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece was conducted. Karamanlis, or Karamanlides, as ethnically Turkish Christians of Central Anatolia were also known, were all sent to Greece in view of their Christian faith, despite the fact that their native language was Turkish and many of them perceived themselves to be Turkish.¹⁴ Except for the family of Papa Eftim, who moved his Turkish Orthodox Church (whose following now consisted of his own family alone) to Istanbul, all Anatolian Christians were sent to Greece.¹⁵ Being ethnically Turkish, only speaking Turkish, being loyal to the Turkish nationalist cause, or any other markers of identity could not prevent any Christian groups or individuals from being sent to Greece as part of this exchange.¹⁶ As a corollary, Greek-speaking Cretan Muslims, who wanted to stay in Crete, Greece, were also forcibly sent to Turkey and welcomed by the Turkish government on the basis of their religious identity as Muslims.¹⁷

Another example of the primacy of religious over ethnic identity in the making of the modern Turkish nation was in immigration policy. Turkey's active encouragement of Muslim immigration from the Balkans, which included numerous people who were not Turkish, such as Albanians, Bosnians, Macedonians, Pomaks, and others, will be discussed below. Complementing the case of Karamanlis as ethnically Turkish Christians who were forced out of Turkey, the Gagauz Turks of Orthodox Christian faith living in Moldova were not allowed to immigrate to the new Turkish Republic, despite being the Turkish group outside of Turkey that speaks a dialect of Turkish closest to the Turkish spoken in Turkey.¹⁸ If the new Turkish Republic chose to redefine Turkish identity strictly on an ethnic-racial basis, and sought to effect a decisive break with the religious definitions of community prevalent in the Ottoman Empire, immigration by the Gagauz should have been accepted, encouraged, and enthusiastically welcomed; but it was rejected outright.¹⁹

Some scholars interpret the exclusion of Karamanlis and Gagauz from the membership of the modern Turkish nation – in my opinion mistakenly – to mean that ethnic and linguistic Turkishness was a necessary but not sufficient condition of membership in the new Turkish nation. According to this view, in order to qualify as immigrants and prospective citizens by the Turkish state, adherence to Sunni Islam

was needed *in addition to* being ethnically and linguistically Turkish. However, a close study of Turkey's immigration policy for the last 80 years, including the crucial foundational period under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, demonstrates without a doubt that the Muslims who were ethnically and linguistically Albanian, Bosnian, Pomak, and of other non-Turkish ethnic backgrounds were accepted as citizens simply because of their profession of Islamic faith, and perhaps also equally importantly, because of their prior membership in the Ottoman Islamic *millet*. This is yet another unmistakable demonstration of the continuity with the Ottoman legacy in defining the modern Turkish nation.²⁰

In fact, the political elite of the new Turkish republic, itself overwhelmingly drawn from people born and raised in the Ottoman Balkans, considered the immigrants from the Balkans, which had a high proportion of people who were not ethnically Turkish, to have a civilizing influence on the country.²¹ To cite one conspicuous example, the Sabbatean community of Thessalonica, which is an ethnically Jewish, religiously esoteric and messianic Jewish sect whose members profess Islam in public, and who numbered 10–15,000 at the turn of the twentieth century, were accepted as immigrants and citizens in the new Turkish Republic.²² This has been demonstrated recently by an unfortunate outburst of anti-Semitic publications in Turkey that identify and allege ethnic Jewish origins and Sabbatean identity to many members of the Turkish intellectual and political elite.²³ The cultural differences of these ethnically non-Turkish people were widely recognized, and the state undertook a policy of geographically dispersing the immigrants to prevent their concentration in particular areas, hence hoping to expedite their assimilation into the culture of the Turkish-speaking majority.²⁴ As a result, Turkey served as a melting pot for the many Muslim ethnic groups that were indigenous to Anatolia and Thrace, or who arrived there as immigrants. The members of the new Turkish nation were allowed to have multi-ethnic origins but only a mono-religious, Muslim, background. The exclusion of non-Muslims was demonstrated throughout the history of the Turkish Republic by state policies that discriminated against Christian ethnic groups and, to a lesser extent, against Jews.

If critical scholars and students of Turkish nationalism mistakenly describe Turkish state policies as mono-ethnic, the official historiography of the Republic makes the false claim that citizens of Muslim and non-Muslim background are treated equally. Discrimination against non-Muslims in Turkey can be divided into two categories: First, the official, state-engineered discrimination enshrined in the legal and bureaucratic arms of the state; and second, societal discrimination either in public or in private by individuals or organizations acting on their own, not under the direction of the state. The focus of this paper on state policies requires that we focus on the first, official type. Official discrimination can be further subdivided into two categories. First, 'instances of discrimination', as one might label them, consist of time- and/or place-specific measures, orders, or legislation enacted by the state against one or several of the non-Muslim ethnic groups. Instances of discrimination are chronologically concentrated in the two decades between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s. In particular, the 1934–44 period, which also corresponds to the ascent of National Socialism in Europe, includes many instances of discrimination. Second, 'systematic discrimination' consists of measures, orders, or legislation that are not time- or place-specific, and that are generally invoked to exclude non-Muslims from

rights and benefits enjoyed by the Muslim majority, often regardless of their ethnic origin.

There are several instances of discrimination that were well publicized and are now documented in popular and academic publications. As discussed earlier, the Jewish community was relatively less discriminated against in the first years of the Republic, compared to the Greeks and the Armenians, and some Turkish Jews such as Tekinalp and Galante were active participants in the ideological construction of the new Turkish nation.

The exchange of all Christians residing outside of Istanbul with Muslims living in Greece created a situation where almost all of the Christians remaining in Turkey, except for a few Assyrians, Nestorians, and Chaldeans in Southeast Anatolia, were living in a few neighbourhoods in Istanbul. Jews, however, not being part of the population exchange, could theoretically live anywhere in Turkey, although unofficially that was also to change. Sizeable Jewish communities existed in Western Anatolian cities such as Bursa, Edirne, and Izmir, and were dispersed across Eastern Thrace, Turkey's foothold in Europe. In 1934, an unofficial campaign of intimidation, perhaps not organized but also not prevented and probably condoned by the state, drove the Jews of Edirne and other Thracian towns from their homes to Istanbul.²⁵ Known as the Thracian Events of 1934, the results of this campaign of intimidation were not reversed by the official authorities, and Jews, like Armenians and Greeks before them, found themselves restricted to Istanbul in terms of their residence, and de facto deprived of their right to choose where to live in their own country.

The 1920s and 1930s also witnessed instances of discrimination against particular non-Muslim individuals, such as the Elza Niyego affair, where the non-Muslim (Jewish) identity of a murder victim was mobilized to create an atmosphere of intimidation against Jews, accompanied by multiple incidents of anti-Semitism.²⁶ However, the Wealth Tax of 1940 was the most significant instance of discrimination against non-Muslims by the Republic of Turkey after the population exchange. Some non-Muslims were taxed at 100 per cent of their income, and those who were unable to pay the tax assigned to them were sent to a labour camp in Askale, near Erzurum, in Eastern Anatolia.²⁷

Finally, 5–6 September 1955 witnessed the most atrocious episode in the history of the Turkish Republic against the Christian minority, when mobs destroyed mostly Greek but also many Armenian and a few Jewish and Turkish stores and residences, mostly in Istanbul but also in Izmir.²⁸ This episode has been compared in nature (but not in scale) to the infamous *Kristalnacht* in Nazi Germany in 1938, when Jewish businesses all over Germany were attacked. It was later demonstrated, both in the trials of government officials after the 1960 military coup and also in the testimonies of key participants in and observers of the event that the attacks of 5–6 September were instigated by the government, which wanted to strengthen Turkey's bargaining power over the Cyprus issue by demonstrating that the Turkish public was very sensitive and explosive regarding this issue.²⁹ It is, however, also clear that this state-engineered demonstration of nationalist feeling went out of control and far beyond what government officials intended.

Apart from major instances of discrimination in certain periods, such as the Wealth Tax, non-Muslims have also been subjected to systematic discrimination

throughout the history of the Republic, and treated as second-class citizens, especially with regard to employment opportunities in the bureaucracy and the military. Non-Muslims are not recruited into the state bureaucracy or to be officers in the military, since both institutions are seen by the state as embodiments of the state and the nation.³⁰ It is also notable that since the 1950s, there has not been a non-Muslim member of the Turkish parliament, except for Jeff Kamhi (the son of the prominent Jewish businessman, Jak Kamhi), who entered the Turkish parliament in 1995. Hrant Dink, the late editor of the Armenian daily newspaper *Agos* and a prominent advocate of civil rights in Turkey, who was shot dead on 19 January 2007, was also one of the many non-Muslims who clearly observed and stated this fact: 'There are no Armenian officers [in the military]. We do not exist at all in the security agencies, police, ministries, and the bureaucracy of the state.'³¹

Overall, non-Muslims in Turkey have been legally codified and treated in practice as second-class citizens with a diminished set of rights, compared to Muslim citizens.³² In great part due to these discriminatory policies of the state, the non-Muslim population of Turkey, especially the Greek population, decreased significantly from the 1930s to the 1960s, both as a proportion of the total population and in absolute terms.³³

In contrast to the instances of discrimination and systematic discrimination discussed above, Muslim citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds have not been subject to the same kind of discrimination. In other words, there is no equivalent of the Population Exchange, Wealth Tax, or the attacks of 5–6 September 1955 for the non-Turkish Muslim ethnic categories, such as Albanians, Arabs, Bosnians, Circassians, Laz, Pomaks, or the largest non-Turkish Muslim ethnic category, Kurds. At the most basic level, the state in Turkey does not register the ethnic background of individual citizens. In order to discriminate among citizens or subject populations of a state on the basis of ethnic or racial background, as in South Africa, or even for programmes of positive discrimination, as in the United States and the Soviet Union, the state needs to determine and register the ethnic background of individual citizens. After the ethnic backgrounds of individuals are registered, positive or negative discrimination on the basis of ethnicity becomes possible. In Turkey, non-Muslims were for a long time marked in their official identification papers as Greek Orthodox, Gregorian Armenian, or Jewish, which are the three official minorities. This notation of religious affiliation was removed very recently, due to European Union pressure. However, the records for the last 80 years endow the state with an exhaustive list of all non-Muslim citizens. For Muslims, which constitute 99 per cent of the population, apart from their religion, there is no further official marker or registration of ethnicity. This is in striking continuity with the Ottoman legacy of classifying the population based on religion, not ethnicity. This situation creates particular challenges as well as opportunities for the formulation of a modern, democratic national identity in Turkey, which will be discussed further below.

The widespread mistake on the part of many area studies scholars in describing the discrimination against non-Muslims and the definition of the modern Turkish nation as 'ethnic' is rooted in part in the misleading dichotomization of citizenship–nationhood into ethnic and civic categories. The ethnic–civic distinction is attributed to Hans Kohn, and reproduced by Anthony Smith and Rogers Brubaker, though the

latter roundly criticized and renounced this distinction later in his career.³⁴ The distinction between ethnic and civic nationhood is already incorrect at the level of semantics. The two terms, supposed to represent polar opposites, are not even produced from the same root. In order to overcome this problem and as a first step in avoiding conceptual confusion, I suggest replacing the ethnic–civic distinction with a tripartite categorization of ethnic, anti-ethnic, and multi-ethnic nationality regimes and nationalisms.³⁵

The dichotomy between ethnic and civic nationalism is misleading, because it does not exhaust the universe of possibilities, and the term civic does not express or clearly describe the attitude of the state vis-à-vis ethnicity. In a ‘civic’ nationalist state, does the state actively support and uphold the cultural and linguistic claims of different ethnic groups, as in ethno-federal states such as Canada, Belgium, and the Russian Federation? Or does the ‘civic’ state disregard or actively suppress any ethnic demands and identifications as part of its pledge to being ‘ethnically blind’, as in France? France and Canada clearly would not count as ‘ethnic’ nationalist states for Hans Kohn, in the way Japan, Israel, and Germany historically have aspired to be, but the difference between the attitude of the French and the Canadian states vis-à-vis ethnicity is vast, and cannot be reduced to the ambiguous category of ‘civic’, especially when this latter category is opposed to an ominously value-laden ‘ethnic’ pole.

Put into these terms, Turkey represents the non-ethnic, or anti-ethnic, model of constituting the nation, similar to France, the country from which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk drew inspiration in many of his reforms. The Turkish model is not mono-ethnic à la Japan, Israel, and Germany (until 2000), which consider themselves as the states of and for one ethnic category (ethnic Japanese, Jews, and Germans, respectively), and hence limit citizenship acquisition through immigration to co-ethnics.

The Ottoman legacy of the Muslim ‘nation/community’ (*millet*), which I argue has been kept in place by the Republic of Turkey as the definition of the modern nation, evades and suppresses any ethnic distinctions among Muslims. On the one hand, this legacy prevented the Turkish Republic from cataloguing the ethnic background of its Muslim citizens and systematically discriminating against one or several of the ethnic categories among Muslims, but, on the other hand, the same tradition of evading and suppressing ethnic differences among Muslims stigmatized any individual or group that emphasized his/her ethnic identity in public, let alone demanded ethnic and cultural rights in politics, as has been the case with many Kurdish groups and individuals that demanded ethnic, cultural, and linguistic rights.

The word *millet*, from the Arabic *milla* and perhaps ultimately of Aramaic origin, occurs in the Koran with the meaning of religion. It was later extended to mean religious community, especially the community of Islam. In the Ottoman Empire it came to be applied to the organized and legally recognized religious communities, such as the Greek Christians, the Armenian Christians, and the Jews, and by extension also to different ‘nations’ of the Franks. Even as applied to the Frankish nations the term was at first understood as having a primarily religious sense. Thus, the English were recognized in the sixteenth century as the ‘Lutheran nation’, and non-English Protestants were regarded as

being under their protection. In the Empire, there was a Muslim *millet*, but no Turkish or Arab or Kurdish *millets*; there were Greek and Armenian and Jewish *millets*, but as religious communities, not as ethnic nations. Until the late nineteenth century, Greeks and Slavs alike formed part of the Greek Orthodox *millet*, while on the other hand Gregorian and Catholic Armenians formed separate *millets*.³⁶

In modern Turkish, even today, *millet* is used in lieu of 'nation' (and *milliyetçilik* is used for 'nationalism') in most translations from other languages and in original Turkish publications, hence contributing to the blurring of boundaries between religious community, legal nationality, and for some, ethnic identity.³⁷

The Ottoman Empire was a political community that tried at the discursive level to be the state of multiple religiously-defined *millets*, the Muslim, Greek-Orthodox, Gregorian-Armenian, Jewish, Assyrian, and others. 'Ottomanism', the ideology behind the Tanzimat Reforms and the declaration of the First and Second Constitutional Monarchy periods, which spanned the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempted to instil an 'Ottoman' identity in Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. This attempt was a genuine one, and although its most fervent supporters were Muslims, and especially Turks, many Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and other non-Turks supported this idea.³⁸ The Greek Orthodox Musurus Pasha, an ardent Ottomanist who was shot and wounded by Greek nationalists when he was serving as the Ottoman ambassador to Athens, is frequently cited as a prominent example of the cosmopolitan, multi-religious ethos of Ottoman identity, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³⁹ Therefore, the question arises as to why and how the multi-religious Ottoman identity, in which Jewish and various Christian denominations were accepted as equals after the Tanzimat Reforms, was transformed into the Turkish nation, in which only members of the Muslim *millet* are accepted as first-class citizens that are welcomed through immigration and accepted into the military and the bureaucracy, while non-Muslims are codified as second-class citizens with diminished rights.

The War of Liberation (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*), which is also known as the National/Religious Struggle (*Milli Mücadele*), is the frame for the definition of the modern Turkish nation, and this struggle set the terms and limits of inclusion into 'Turkishness', separating Muslim from non-Muslim and designating the former as potential Turks ready for secular-republican conversion in a linguistic, territorial, and ideological sense of belonging.⁴⁰ There was an early attempt in a 'civic' direction by expanding the definition of Turkishness to include Jews, as witnessed in the attempts of Kemalist Turkish nationalists such as Moiz Kohen and Abraham Galanti, who were discussed earlier. The relative openness of the new Turkish state in accepting Jews as refugees and citizens and incorporating them into the Turkish nation, as opposed to the virtual exclusion of Christians, is also demonstrated by the admission of Jewish scientists and intellectuals into Turkey by Atatürk in 1933.⁴¹ But this opening toward Jews was effectively closed with the increasing influence of anti-Semitic ideas spread by the German National Socialist regime in Turkey under İsmet İnönü's leadership in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as demonstrated by the Wealth Tax and other similar measures that harmed Jews and other non-Muslims.⁴²

Although the opening to Jews, which if successful would have transformed the mono-religious view of Turkish nationhood and hence truly marked a radical break with the Ottoman past, was aborted, Turkish nationalism also did not evolve in a mono-ethnic nationalist direction, disenfranchising non-Turkish Muslim ethnicities in citizenship, immigration, and employment, as some radical nationalist critics desired. Rıza Nur, Minister of Health and a key representative of the national government negotiating the Lausanne Treaty, was one such ethnic Turkish nationalist critic who was appalled by the very high number of Albanians, Circassians, and other non-Turkish Muslims who were assuming/had assumed important positions in Turkish politics.⁴³ Later in the 1940s, the racist circles around Nihal Atsız represented yet another group of critics who wanted a state for Turks, by Turks, in which ethnic non-Turks would be codified as second-class citizens, which would in effect have established an *Apartheid* regime. However, not all ethnic nationalists were as marginalized as Nihal Atsız and Rıza Nur were or have become. The Minister of Justice, Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, infamously stated that, ‘the lord of this country is the Turk. That who is not purely Turkish has only one right in the Turkish homeland, and that is to be a servant, a slave’.⁴⁴ However, the fact that Bozkurt lost his ministerial post due to these remarks was a sign that the Kemalist government was careful to keep the radical ethnic nationalist elements away from key positions of power.

In accepting Albanians, Bosnians, Macedonians, Pomaks, and other non-Turks from the Balkans as immigrants, the Turkish Republic demonstrated most clearly that it did not intend to limit citizenship and employment to ethnic Turks in the new state, as ethnic Turkish nationalists would have preferred. Just as the immigration regime demonstrates that membership in the new nation was not limited to ethnic Turks but was open to an array of Muslim ethnicities, the official minority regime demoted to ‘minority’ status three of the historic Ottoman *millet*s: Greek Orthodox, Gregorian Armenians, and Jews. Rıza Nur, in his memoirs, states that he was aware, as one of the two leading members of the Turkish delegation in Lausanne, that the Europeans recognized four types of minorities – those based on religion, sect, language, and ethnicity. After giving examples of what kind of minorities would be created if Turkey accepted each one of these criteria as a basis for minority recognition, Nur unequivocally states that the Turkish state cannot but accept any minorities except for the religious.⁴⁵ As such, the official minority regime in Turkey recognized and reinforced the major axis of inclusion/exclusion in the definition of Turkishness as religious, not ethnic, linguistic, or sectarian. This official stance has thoroughly structured and determined the nature of Alevi and Kurdish demands for ethnic and sectarian recognition to the present day.

The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) is often credited with being the political forerunner of a Turkish nationalism with ethnic undertones, especially in the 1913–18 period when it held unchecked power.⁴⁶ Intellectuals affiliated with the CUP prepared reports on the Alevi and the Kurds, which had a deep impact on the establishment of the standard Turkish nationalist view on Alevi and Kurds. The two key researchers and reports in this regard are, respectively, Ziya Gökalp’s ‘Sociological Investigations on the Kurdish Tribes’, and Baha Said’s unpublished

report on the Alevi, to which only high-ranking members of the CUP were allowed access.⁴⁷ The Turkish nationalist theses about Alevi and Kurds put forward in the Said and Gökalp reports had a staying power well beyond the reign of the CUP, into the Turkish Republic and up until the present day.

Alevi were and are presented as pure ethnic Turks, nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkmen tribes who can trace their lineage to Central Asia, and who practise a particularly Turkish form of Islam infused with ur-Turkic shamanistic beliefs dating back to pre-Islamic Central Asian religions. Another very important dimension of the claim that Alevi are pure ethnic Turks is that the Turkish spoken by Alevi was unadulterated by the Arabic and Persian elements that had infiltrated the Ottoman Turkish language. As such, in their efforts to purify the Turkish language, the nationalists benefited from Alevi-Turkmen songs, poetry, and forms of speech in Anatolia. As opposed to the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul, where the old Ottoman Turkish culture was centred, Alevi were overwhelmingly concentrated in Central Anatolia, the new heartland of Turkish nationalist imagination in the early period of the Turkish Republic.

The identification of Alevi as pure ethnic Turks posed one of the first, and rather ironic, paradoxes of Turkish nationalism in general and of the Turkish nationalist leadership more specifically: The Turkish nationalist elite, both the CUP leadership and later the Republican People's Party (RPP) leadership, were overwhelmingly Sunni, just as the traditional Ottoman elite before them had always been. However, only the Turkmen, who were mostly Alevi, could make a credible claim to being pure ethnic Turks, whereas the left-Kemalist and right-Kemalist/nationalist political leadership were both overwhelmingly Sunni. This paradox became more pronounced in the post-1960 period, when a political nationalist movement under the leadership of Alparslan Türkeş emerged, first organized in the CKMP political party and later in MHP. Not only were Alevi, as the purported ethnic Turks with links to Central Asia, not attracted to this new political nationalist movement and party, but they were actively opposed to it in the highly polarized political climate of the 1970s.⁴⁸

Kemalism, as a manifestation of secular nationalism, softened to a great extent the traditional tension and conflict between the state and the Alevite communities, which were persecuted under Ottoman rule and had had to seek refuge in impenetrable mountain villages and the like. Mustafa Kemal was even hailed as the long-awaited Mehdi (the Messiah in Alevite and Shiite Islam) by some Alevite members of the First Parliament.⁴⁹ There were 27 Alevite members of the First Parliament, and Cemalettin Çelebi, a leader of the Bektashi Sufi Order, was a deputy chair of the Parliament. The Alevite and Bektashi support for Mustafa Kemal was remarkable, and there were even rumours that Mustafa Kemal himself was a Bektashi.⁵⁰

The alliance with the Alevi was both pragmatic and ideological. The pragmatic aspect consisted of establishing the widest possible common front against the invaders during the War of Liberation; the ideological, if also somewhat romantic nationalist aspect consisted of using the heterodox Alevi as a societal base for secularization and moving away from Islamic Sharia on the one hand, and as a linguistic and folkloric resource and inspiration in the construction of a new national identity on the other. Despite the many functions that the Alevi fulfilled, the Kemalist leadership remained overwhelmingly Sunni in its cadres, and the definition of the nation, as discussed throughout this essay, demonstrated a striking continuity

with the Ottoman notion of the Muslim *millet*. What was and still is very problematic about the Ottoman legacy and Ottoman notions of identity for the Alevis is that Islam for Ottomans was Sunni Islam, and heterodox Muslims, as represented by the Alevis, were often more harshly treated, persecuted, and excluded than non-Muslims.⁵¹

The Turkish nation, which I have argued has been identified as a Muslim nation, has been further qualified as a Hanefi Sunni Muslim nation. As Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, who served as the director of Religious Affairs between 1947 and 1951, wrote in a textbook approved by the Ministry of Education, 'All Turks are Muslim in belief, and Hanefi in deed'.⁵² Turkey's transition to multi-party politics coincided with the resurgence of Ottoman and Islamic idioms in public and in politics.⁵³ It is understandable that this development was not welcomed by the intellectual and political leaders of the Alevi community, as they do not have a favourable interpretation of Ottoman history and its legacy, which they associate with sectarian persecution and massacres, especially during the reign of Selim II, who was known as 'Yavuz' (The Grim) for his cruelty.⁵⁴ Given such a negative perception of the Ottoman state and its history, it is difficult not to see the Ottoman legacy as a major and difficult challenge for the inclusion of the Alevis into the Turkish national identity, to the extent that the modern Turkish national identity demonstrates continuity with the Ottoman Muslim *millet*, as I have argued in this essay. Kemalism functioned as an ideology of inclusion insofar as it repudiated the Ottoman past and promised a secular, non-religious future.

The tripartite demands of the Alevi community for the last half-century have been: the recognition of *Cemevi* as houses of worship, the reformulation of religion and ethics courses to include Alevi beliefs, and the restructuring of the Directorate of Religious Affairs or the building of a parallel but separate structure so that Alevi *dedes* can be employed and render religious services to Alevis, financed by the taxes collected and channelled by the state.⁵⁵ The satisfaction of these three main demands and the official recognition of the Alevi identity can be said to draw on the example of the Bektashi order and its officially recognized status among the Jannissaries in Ottoman history, rather than the legacy of the Ottoman *millet* system, within which Alevis did not have a place. As such, the successful incorporation of Alevi demands for recognition requires a creative recasting of identity and a re-evaluation of Ottoman and Republican history alike.

Kurdish demands for recognition, expressed through both legal and illegal channels, often include positive references to Ottoman history, and even present demands for cultural and linguistic rights as a resuscitation of the autonomous status of Kurds vis-à-vis the Ottoman state. Unlike Alevis, who viewed the founding of the Republic and the Kemalist reforms as the most radical expansion of Alevi rights and freedoms and an end to centuries of Ottoman-Sunni oppression, many proponents of Kurdish ethnic and linguistic rights, including both leftist and rightist politicians, perceive the founding of the Republic as a major setback for the rights and freedoms of Kurds.⁵⁶ This view is shared by most Islamist politicians and intellectuals, who regard the founding of the Republic as a regression in terms of the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic autonomy of the different Muslim ethnicities.⁵⁷

According to this view, Kurds allied with and hence willingly submitted to the authority of the Sunni Ottoman state in its struggle against the Shia Safavid Iran.

İdris-i Bitlisi represents the key religious and political figure, who arranged for this alliance at the beginning of the sixteenth century (around 1515).⁵⁸ According to this view, the five-centuries-long Turkish–Kurdish alliance based on Sunni Islam was broken when the new Turkish Republic abolished the Caliphate and replaced Islamic institutions with secular ones, which explains the string of major Kurdish rebellions between 1925 and 1938. Following this logic, the natural suggestion to solve the Kurdish question appears to be the re-emphasis of the Ottoman legacy and the Islamic bond between Turks and Kurds.⁵⁹

The Ottoman legacy has a profound influence on the nature and framing of the Kurdish question in Turkey. First and foremost, the demands of Kurds have been for basic recognition of their existence, and later, of their linguistic and cultural rights. This is a manifestation of the Ottoman legacy, because under the Ottoman *millet* system no Muslim ethnic group could attain separate legal status by virtue of its ethnic or linguistic differences. Nation was co-terminus with religious affiliation. The Kurdish nationalist struggle in Turkey has attempted to break away from the legacy of the Muslim *millet*, sometimes even by openly acknowledging that Islam is a major barrier preventing the satisfaction of Kurdish nationalist aspirations.⁶⁰ The Islamist solution is formulated with a similar recognition of the role of Islam, but with a radically different political orientation.

The Islamist solution to the Kurdish question, however, disregards the difficulty – if not impossibility – of reversing the results of long-term historical processes, such as the new secular reality that eight decades of secularization have created among the Kurds of Eastern Anatolia, as elsewhere in Turkey. On the other hand, the Kurdish nationalist solution, which is ethnic federalism or outright secession from Turkey, radically contradicts the Ottoman legacy as well as the expressed opinion of the Kurdish citizens of Turkey. Instead of codifying Kurds as an ‘ethnic minority’ or as a ‘founding [national] element’ (*kurucu unsur*) in an ethno-federal republic, an alternative solution that is more in tune with the Ottoman legacy and liberal democratic standards would be a comprehensive reform of the local administration throughout Turkey, not just in Eastern Anatolia, that would increase local accountability, efficiency, and governance capacity.

The definition of Turkish nationhood after the founding of the Republic has been evaluated and labelled very differently by various scholars. The classical view paralleled the official representation of Republican policies in describing Turkish nationhood as being based on a civic and territorial understanding of nationality. More recent and much more critical scholarship, which enjoys a near-hegemonic position in the study of Turkish nationalism today, claims that the official definition of Turkish nationhood has a clearly identifiable mono-ethnic orientation, manifest in a series of policies and institutions. In this article, I argued that the definition of Turkish nationhood as manifest in state policies is neither territorial nor mono-ethnic, but rather ironically for the adamantly secular Turkish republic, the definition of Turkish nationhood is mono-religious and anti-ethnic, in striking continuity with the legacy of the Islamic *millet* under the Ottoman Empire.

The reason critical scholars label the definition of Turkish nationhood as mono-ethnic might stem from the dichotomous view of nationalisms as civic versus ethnic,

a misleading dichotomy that has recently been repudiated even by some of its erstwhile proponents. The supremacy of religious over ethnic categories in Turkey, as a historical legacy of the Ottoman *millet* system, might be comparable to most post-Ottoman states in the Islamic Middle East and North Africa, in contrast to the supremacy of ethnicity and religion in Western Europe.

The continuity between the Islamic *millet* as an Ottoman legacy and the formulation of Turkish nationhood is confirmed by a review of Turkey's policies on immigration, citizenship, public employment, minority policies, and a dozen interviews conducted with members of the political and intellectual elite of different ideological orientations in Turkey. In conclusion, efforts at reformulating modern Turkish identity with reference to Ottoman and Islamic conceptions lead to new inclusion-exclusion dynamics vis-à-vis the Kurds and the Alevi, suggesting that a truly inclusive reformulation has to follow a creative path that is simultaneously guided by liberal democratic standards while being in tune with the Ottoman legacy.

Notes

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