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## **SYMBOLS IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: EVALUATION ON TURKEY IN THE EARLY REPUBLICAN PERIOD**

### **Abstract:**

This study is on the formation of the Turkish national identity throughout the historical process defined as the Early Republican Period and function of the symbols in this formation process. In this study Early Republican Period is used to define the time slice between the years 1923 and 1938 in Turkey. Distinguishing feature of the period in question is redefinition of the state and society. In this redefinition process, symbols such as religion, Ottoman, sultan, flag, Islamic ummah, cult, madrasah, Quran, sharia, rayah, imamah, which are the elements of the symbol repertoire of the Ottoman society and constitute a meaningful whole, are replaced with Republic, nation, civilization, homeland, flag, Turk, hat, citizen, school. In line with the nationalization, civilizing and secularization principles, Republican discourse tried to reform both the symbols, which are the content of the cultural behavior, and the context, in which these symbols are formed and given meaning. In Turkish literature, opposition of the Kemalist nation formation process to the Islam and its symbols is frequently stated. In this study, it will be argued that Islam has played a key role in the formation of the Turkish national identity contrary to the general opinion and that flag and national anthem of the nation state are nourished by the Islamic references.

### **Keywords:**

Symbols, Nation Building, Turkey

## Introduction

Symbols and rituals, which immediately come to mind with the concept of symbol have a specific function not only in the building of a new social order, but in maintaining the existing social order as well. Indeed, symbols and rituals are unique instruments due to their inherent nature and in enhancing social motivation. Both phenomena, in a sense, avail in rendering the impact of the pressure of management and administration invisible or endurable through the creation of objects and concepts worth self-sacrifice. Symbols retain an indispensable value for all forces that aim to establish power. The Kemalist regime made the most of such powers of not only these symbols, but also rituals, and symbolic instruments of the Ottoman power were substituted by the symbols and meanings of the Kemalist revolution since 1923 (Akman, 2011: 86).

Consequently, such symbols as religion, flag, Ottoman, sultan, Islamic community (ummah), imamah, rayah, sharia, Qoran, madrasah, cult, which compose a meaningful whole and are elements of the corpus of Ottoman society have been substituted by nation, civilization, Republic, flag, Turk, citizen, homeland, school, hat, etc. In this context, the civilizing, secularization and nationalization principles went parallel both with reforms implemented on these symbols, which form the content of cultural attitudes, and on the context where such symbols are constituted and denominated by the Republican discourse (Şengül and Kardeş, 2003: 38). The opposition of the Kemalist nation-building process to Islam and its symbols is often referred to in the Turkish literature. In this study, it is argued that, as opposed to the general opinion, Islam played a major role in the formation of Turkish national identity, and that nation state's flag and the national anthem have been benefited from Islamic patterns.

## Turkish National Identity, Secularism and Islam

One of the basic arguments frequently addressed in the Turkish literature has been "The presumption that Islam could inhibit the nation-building and modernization processes envisaged for the newly established Turkish Republic due to being reactionary and potentially threatening power. Islam was banned and ousted from public and private domains by Kemalists through adherence to secular Turkish nationalism. The new Turkish national identity envisaged by Kemalists to be established was modern and had no ties with the obsolete religious patterns. (Waxman, 2000: 8-9). For example according to Küçükcan (2010: 964-965), the nation established after the demise of the Ottoman Empire was built on secular ideologies and has since formed its own symbols, rituals, myths, common memories, and goals. All reforms made in the Republican period in the framework of establishing a secular and modern state and formation of the Turkish national identity undermined the Ottoman legacy in terms of its political, cultural and social influence. The aims of "removing all symbols related with the Ottoman Islamic heritage" and radically "breaking from the Ottoman period" were accompanied by reforms such as removing the article which stipulated Islam as the state religion from the constitution (1928), closure of religious shrines (turbes) and the dervish lodges (tekkes) (1925), abolition of the Caliphate (1924), abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations (1924), adoption of the Latin alphabet instead of the Arabic one and "Turkification" of the call to prayer (1932). Such developments referred to a total break-off from former cultural and literary patterns. Adoption of the Western-style clothing, adoption of the Gregorian calendar (1926), changing the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday, introduction of Western music in schools, adoption of the Swiss civil and Italian penal codes, and adoption of laws concerning unification of education

(1924) were among the major reforms made between the years of 1924 and 1935, which all contributed to the formation of secular symbols, rituals and myths.

It is true that the new Turkish Republic established after the demise of the Ottoman Empire was built on a secular basis. However, it does not mean that the conclusion that “Kemalism has always been an opponent of Islam from past to present, and attempted to put national identification in lieu of religious identification which has been prevalent among the Turkish community up to then. Kemalism’s relationship with Islam has been sophisticated and dynamic since the beginning of the Republican period. A large majority of the population still belonged to Islam in the 1920s, the religious symbolism of which must have been noticed by Mustafa Kemal to make him introduce more acceptable secularization reforms. This was a particularly influential symbolism when the radical decision to abolish the Ottoman dynasty (1922) and the caliphate position (1924), which functioned as the supreme religious authority representing all Muslims, was taken. The fact that religious leaders from a variety of sections of Anatolia rendered considerable support in winning the War of Independence and mobilized the population to back up Mustafa Kemal is matter to be considered as well. Several of these religious figures then became members of the Grand National Assembly in 1920, which is portrayed in a famous photograph “Prayer for Victory” (1921), depicting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk beside turban wearing deputies with religious garbs, praying with open hands in front of the Assembly. Considering the sentiments of those figures as well as their constituencies, it was necessary to manage the situation carefully and by showing respect to Islamic symbols besides those of the sultan. Mustafa Kemal was bestowed the title “gazi”, which literally means “fighter for Islamic faith” in this period, which demonstrates very well this representation of a nation as a secular religion. A 1923 painting by Tahirzade Hüseyin titled “The Great Gazi, His Highness Mustafa Kemal Pasha” is specifically illustrative. In this painting, Mustafa Kemal is portrayed as surrounded by angels in the same representational genre as that of miniature paintings depicting the life of the Prophet (Bozdoğan, 2001: 44).

Those who persist on the point that Kemalism was controversial with religion evaluate these behaviors of his as a strategic move aimed at gaining the support of conservative cadres of the society during the years of war of independence. However, in our opinion, it does not seem to be appropriate to evaluate the Turkish nation-building process within the framework of a secular nationalist understanding and overlooking the relationship between the Turkish national identity and Islam. The most express evidence of Islam’s role in the establishment of the Turkish national identity was probably Sunni Islam’s being one of the determinant factors in the formation of the political community. Sunni Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Bosnians, Pomaks, Cretans, Abkhazs, Cherkes, Chechens and Lazes integrated in the Ottoman political integrity are seen to have been included in the Kemalist nation building. Despite the fact that these non-Muslim communities were included in political life, Christian Gagauzian Turks and Shiite Azeris were not allowed to immigrate, which was justified by their ethnical roots as well as the fact that “Religion and ethnicity were distinctive factors in determining the nature of the Turkish nation in an implied way (Ateş, 2007: 65). In other words, determining those subject to population transfer according to the criterion of religion is an indicator of the fact that the new elite retained the emphasis on the legacy of Ottoman national system and Islam, which was the unifying factor of the national independence period (Yıldız, 2001: 133).

Another significant example that could be addressed in the context of Islam’s influence on the Turkish nation-building process is the Turkish flag. We consider the Turkish flag

an important example since it was a symbol used by Ottomans and also includes Islamic references. The flag has various references in literature and the national anthem including the “red banner” (alsancak), “moon-star” (ayyıldız), and “red flag” (albayrak). The current flag was adopted as one of the essential symbols of Turkish independence after the war. The red color on the flag represents the blood of those who became martyrs in their fight against the infidel occupying forces. The White crescent and the five-cornered star in the middle of the flag date back to a popular Turkish myth that Turkish soldiers lost so much blood during the war that their blood was spread all over, and the crescent and the star were reflected on the blood bath. This story composes the symbolic basis of the Turkish flag (Küçükcan, 2010: 971). Although these symbols bear close similarity to the reformation-era Ottoman flag of the late 19th century (Tanzimat), the official layout and color of the flag was adopted in 1936. The crescent can be found on the flag of a number of Islamic countries’ flags (e.g. Algeria, Turkey, Pakistan, etc.), which is an indicator of Islam and it functions as one of its symbols in spite of all historical conflicts they suffer from (Tzankova and Schiphorst, 2010: 6; Brown, 2006: 8). The five points on the star are speculated to represent the five essential elements on which Islamic faith is based. The crescent moon has central function in the Muslim lunar calendar because each Muslim month starts with the sighting of the new moon. A majority of the Muslim countries are non-Arabic speaking, but are affiliated with the greater Muslim World (Khan, 2015). According to Parshall (2002: 5), the moon appears as an arc of light that resists the darkness of cosmos at specific times of the month. This reflection of glory in silver is referred to by a prevalent Muslim population as the “crescent” of Islam. As the moon witnesses the sun, so Islam bears testimony to the radiance and glory of the sovereign Allah. As Christians enshrine the cross - or, better, what it symbolizes - so Muslims revere the image of the crescent. Both symbols speak of the relation of the one God to human beings.

Like most old flags, a number of legends are told that describe the history and creation of the The Turkish national anthem, “The March of Liberation” (İstiklal Marşı). It is an adaptation from Mehmet Akif Ersoy’s poem he wrote in the early part of the last century. It was selected as national anthem from among a number of other possibilities in the establishment years of the republic (Yashin, 2002: 220). The Turkish National Anthem accommodates a blend of nationalist and Islamic themes. For example, Ersoy addresses the Turkish flag as the crescent (hilal), which appears on the Turkish flag (Dede, 2008: 350). According to Başkan (2014) the Turkish national anthem, frequently dominates a religious terminology:

*Oh glorious God, the sole wish of my pain-stricken heart is that*

*No infidel’s hand should ever touch the bosom of thy sacred temples.*

*These adhans (Islamic call to prayer) and these shadadhs (witnessing) that my hearing is accustomed to are the foundations of my religion*

*And my their noble sound last loud and wide over my eternal homeland.*

A similar point was made by (2013: 79) and Alev’s (2014: 16) studies. They also think that Ersoy explains his love for the country by such religious terms of connotation as “God Almighty”, “the crescent”, “deserved by religion”, “faith”, “heaven”, “martyrs”, “adhan”, “testimony”. Akif addresses to his nation through the World of values handed over to them by the Koran.

In the light of the above arguments, it is suggested by Waxman (2000) and Schön (2013) that the dominant understanding of Turkish nationalism as a form of secular nationalism,

as well as the association between Turkish national Identity and Islam must be radically revised.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested in the above analysis of the relation between Turkish nationalism and Islam that Kemalist nationalism is not a secular nationalism and the Turkish national identity which was constructed in accordance with the Kemalist ideology, is not a secular identity. Despite the constant tensions and disputes between Islamists and secularists in Turkey, the huge majority in both cadres share the belief that Islam constitutes an essential aspect of "Turkishness". It is possible to view this in the given manner both in the construction process of a political community and the two significant symbols of national unity. Islam had been a reference point in determining the borders of a new country whose territorial borders were just being drawn, who would be accepted as legal and legitimate members of this political community, and who would be excluded therefrom; and religion took a central determining role in the migration and settlement policies in the 1930s. Kemalist regime, which shaped the political community under establishment based on religion interestingly chose to use the crescent-star flag, which had also been used in Ottoman times, to represent this political community. The national anthem determined by the Kemalist regime also possesses strong symbolic expressions where religious and national sentiments are interwoven. All this certainly does not refer to a rejection of the fact that Mustafa Kemal initiated the construction of a secular nation-state. It is stressed that the Kemalist nation-building process does not signify hostility to Islam, since an ideology that would act with such hostility would be expected to remove Islamic elements from its flag and anthem that are the most important representatives of a nation. However, the flag, which is mentioned to be worth dying for has a "crescent" on it, and all the blood shed for the sake of the crescent and star is given blessing as is martyrdom.

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