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"Peace at Home, Peace in the World": The Rise and Role of Nationalism in Turkish Political Life

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"Peace at Home, Peace in the World"*:
The Rise and Role of Nationalism in Turkish Political Life

By MORGAN BEACH

"Only by grasping the power of nationalism and the continuing appeal of national identity through their rootedness in pre-modern ethnic symbolism and modes of organization is there some chance of understanding the resurgence of ethnic nationalism at a time when 'objective' conditions might appear to render it obsolete. Without such understanding, we shall remain bewildered onlookers of unpredictable political dramas in a world of contradictory trends and antagonistic forces." [1]

Nationalism in a Globalized World

There have been many arguments over recent years regarding the role of nationalism in an ever-globalizing world. Is nationalism becoming irrelevant? Will the nation become a political entity of the past? Or has increased global cohesion caused an increased affinity to a local identity? While the specifics are still debated, most observers point to one fact: nationalism and its political harbingers are stronger than ever. Anthony D. Smith, Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics asserts:

> "In particular, we are witnessing a rebirth of ethnic nationalism, of religious fundamentalisms and of group antagonisms which were thought to have been long buried. Ethnic protests for autonomy and secession, wars of national irredentism and explosive racial conflicts over labour markets and social facilities have proliferated in every continent. In the era of globalization and transcendence, we find ourselves caught in a maelstrom of conflicts over political identities and ethnic fragmentation." [2]

These ethnic nationalisms are generally thought to provide and maintain a solid identity for groups who otherwise see their cultural distinctiveness slipping away into what is, in many cases, a homogenous Westernization. Many scholars see globalization as the destruction of national identity and a threat to nation-states, particularly with respect to the growth of the internet and mass media. This is not the case. The international resurgence of tribalism and ethno-nationalism in recent decades is a testament to the spirit of ethno-national affinity in the modern world. Globalization removes the *artificial* bonds of ever changing political borders in favor of restoring the *natural* bonds of regionalism,

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*"Peace at Home, Peace in the World" is the official motto of the Republic of Turkey coined by Mustafa Kemal.

ethno-nationalism and populism. Globalism is restoring world order, not dismantling it. Nationality is no longer the strongest communal tie of many of the world's citizens today. Kurds, Palestinians, and Tibetans are all such political entities. This is the development of organic bonds; an affiliation and identity of the citizen's *choice*. Globalization fosters this choice of community association and, by effect, is strengthening nationalistic connections.[3] Formal socialization weakens trust and responsibility in many cases because it is inorganic. The response to global communities is this rise of both ethno-nationalism/tribalism *and* simultaneously cosmopolitanism.[4] Citizens can belong to several groups, transcending traditional categorization of regional/global and homogenous/diverse.

The growth of a global culture has certain recognized benefits for international cooperation and modern life, but it has also caused a massive upheaval of traditional social norms. Smith contends that so many people cling to the idealisms of national identity because:

> "In this unprecedented situation, nations and nationalisms are necessary, if unpalatable, instruments for controlling the destructive effects of massive social change; they provide the only large-scale and powerful communities and belief systems that can secure a minimum of social cohesion, order and meaning in a disruptive and alienating world."[5]

We must put this theory into practice. One nation that has a highly nationalistic culture with both the popular support and legal means to back it up is modern day Turkey.

A Brief History of Modern Turkish Identity

In order to provide a background for the concepts outlined in this paper, I will briefly describe Turkish culture and history, and share some of my personal experiences that contributed to my interest in Turkish identity. During my brief tenure at Yeditepe University in Istanbul, studying in the International Political Science Faculty, I gained a wealth of knowledge about Turkish patriotism. In my experience, almost any Turk is willing to sit down over tea, Turkish coffee and nargile and discuss the modern state of Turkish or international affairs. Every Turk I came across had clear and decisive opinions on current events and history. Although they rarely agreed on political matters, their views all came from a fierce sense of patriotism and Turkish identity.

Turkey, as it is known now, has not always been the proud nationalist state we see today.   Before the Republic of Turkey was officially established in 1923, the region was the core of the Ottoman Empire. Modern day Istanbul was known as the great city of Constantinople under the expansive reach of the Ottomans, and 623 year prior it was known as Byzantium, the jewel of the Byzantine Empire. One thing has remains constant: Istanbul and Anatolia (modernly central Turkey) have been the crucial areas as a core to controlling periphery of this region. Turkey's long storied history culminates with a country longing to play a role on the global stage, and more specifically, in the Western world.

The Turkish Republic has been a regional power devoted to the tenets of liberal democracy since its inception in the early 20th century. Turkey has been an encouraging example, leading the East in the development of a globalism favoring a free-market and democratic international system. Turks have identified with a complicated dichotomy of adopting Western political behavior but Eastern culture for decades. In truth, Turks have had a hard time placing themselves in any one region or culture for a considerable amount

of time. Different regimes over the centuries have called Turkey a European, Middle Eastern, Eurasian, Mediterranean or Balkan country. Depending on the benefits of affiliation at the time, Turkey is a chameleon with only one true identity: uniquely Turkish. The founding architect of modern Turkish identity is one man whose idealism is legendary in his mother country of the Republic of Turkey: Atatürk.

Literally meaning "Father of the Turks" in Turkish, Mustafa Kemal "Atatürk" was an Ottoman General who gained military and political notoriety during the Battle of Gallipoli during WWI. After the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, he devoted his life to re-establishing a pan-Turkish identity for those in the newly established state. More than any other objective, Atatürk sought to unify Turkey under a regime of modernization, democracy and development. The Republic of Turkey was officially established with the ending of the War of Independence, fought in 1923 against the Allies who had taken control of the region after WWI.

Atatürk's particular political ideology, known as "Kemalism", has two key doctrines: modernization and democratization. While various other theoretical tenets contribute to these applied principles today, virtually all of current Turkish political moves have a base in one of these two canons.

Kemalist Principles of Modernization

There are six basic principles of Kemalism which have been formed around the objectives of modernization of the Turkish state and society. These principles were incorporated into the Turkish Constitution in 1924 during Atatürk's Presidency and reformed and developed over the decades. The Turkish Constitution was rewritten and ratified in 1961 and again, most recently, in 1982. The six principles are as follows:

1. Republicanism— Only a republican regime can establish national sovereignty. This principle enjoys widespread acceptance and protection under the latest Turkish Constitution.

2. Nationalism— Several key factors to Turkish nationalism make up a unique and integral part of Kemalism. Kemalist nationalism is secular, which separates Turkey from many of its close Middle Eastern neighbors which base much of their nationalism on religious affiliation. Kemalist nationalism is also anti-imperialist and generally unconcerned with race or ethnicity. According to Kemalist ideology, one's identity is not determined by religion or race but by devotion to the ideals and goals of the Turkish republic and commitment to Turkey's independence and modernization. Kemalism was characterized by this fidelity to nationalistic beliefs as well as its acceptance of certain outside ideas, methods and legal codes from around the world. Kemalist nationalism aided in the growth of democratic institutions and the opening of Turkish society by promoting the idea that the more outside ideas they brought in, the more they could achieve ascendancy in the global order. This anti-persecution version of nationalism is not absolute, however, as in cases of the Kurds to be discussed later.

3. Populism—Populism in Turkish policy is possibly the most salient tenet of modern constitutional principles. Kemalism is devoted to "bottom-up" reform and defines itself as a people's program. In the beginning of the modern Turkish state, populism allowed Atatürk to unite the country under one viable and encompassing ideal. Current interpretations of populism in Turkey accept the reality of social-economic class differences

but strive to reduce social tension and raise perceptions of the overall standard for the lowest classes.

     4. Étatism—Government regulation of the Turkish economy is still prevalent today, but not nearly as pervasive as during the early part of the 20th century. In the absence of development standards at the beginning of the modern Turkish republic, a liberal economic market nearly failed the country before the state stepped in, raising the standards of business, manufacturing and trade. In many cases, this move was feared as a step toward socialism but the state-controlled entities emerged in the early decades after the implementation of government regulation as a key source of economic activity in the country and grew private entities as a result.

     5. Secularism—Many changes were made during Atatürk's administration to bring about secularism. Atatürk and the Turkish intelligentsia saw politically active religious organizations as a hindrance to modern reformism. To these reformists, secularism was "the line of demarcation between traditionalism and reformism."[6] On top of the formal separation of church and state, Kemalists also took control of all religious establishments in order to absolutely ensure this separation. The 1961 Constitution devoted much legal protection to secularism and it was reaffirmed in the 1982 ratification. The elections of 2007 brought a party into power that is attempting to remove these legal protections and increase the role of Islam in Turkey's national government. The ruling AK Party had charges filed against it claiming "the party had become a focal point of anti-secular acts."[7] This case will be discussed further at the end of the section.

     6. Devrimcilik (Reformism-Revolutionism)—The contemporary interpretation of this Turkish paradigm is as a continuous commitment to adaptation of Kemalist principles and national ideals with a goal of maintaining modernization of the state. It is basically a principle instilled to maintain the pre-eminence of Kemalism politically while allowing for adaptation with changing times and flexibility to current events.[8]

     This paper focuses on two Kemalist constitutional principles: nationalism and secularism. In terms of the criticism of Turkish nationalism, there are two clear contemporary examples of its continual need for development: the current state of Kurdish affairs in Southern Turkey and the recent international dispute over Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

     Turkish nationalism, overall, claims to be racially and ethnically blind, gauging one's "Turkishness" through devotion to modern Turkish ideals rather than heritage. While in many cases this is true, one essential case where it fails is that of the Kurds. Ethnically Kurdish peoples reside in the southern parts of Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran and eastern Syria– an area often referred to as 'Kurdistan.' The Turkish military has clashed with Kurdish militants many times since the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, but the most recent conflict began in October 2007, when the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) began attacking Turkish soldiers in the southeastern part of Anatolia. The rebels, who advocate the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in southern Turkey, capitalized on instability in northern regions of Iraq and began launching attacks on Turkish army convoys. When the U.S. armed forces in Iraq were unable to control the attacks, Turkey launched air strikes targeting mountainous regions in Iraq where PKK leaders were reportedly hiding. The air strikes continued through the summer of 2008. There have also been bombing and protests in both southern Anatolia and Istanbul supporting separatist movements and decrying the recently elected national party. Despite advances

toward establishing freedom of expression the last few decades in Turkey, statements demeaning Atatürk in particular or the Turkish identity in general are still outlawed. Many see this law as discriminatory towards Kurds. The Turkish government views Kurdish efforts to liberate the southern region of Anatolia as "anti-Turkish," this ethnic group has born the brunt of many years of constitutionally-imposed oppression founding in Turkish nationalism.

Proponents of Kemalism contend that it "is not a persecuting nationalism… [with] no neurotic rejection of responsibility for the past."[9] This assertion is challenged by Turkish responses to the Armenian Genocide of the early 20th Century. While the Republic of Turkey is not responsible in a strict political sense for the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (which occurred under the Ottoman Empire), Turkey provoked controversy in the world of international affairs in the fall of 2006 by denying that the genocide ever took place. France particularly took an interest in the matter, announcing that they would block any Turkish applications to the European Union until the Turkish government recognized the massacres as genocide. Protests broke out across Turkey in response to the French declaration, calling for a boycott of French goods and denouncing France as interfering in the sovereignty of Turkish national issues.

Another modern challenge to Kemalism is a perceived attack on secularism in Turkey today. The lawsuit against the AK Party concerning its promotion of anti-secular acts, such as removing the ban on headscarves in government buildings and universities, has become an all-out war of words. Although the battle is being waged more in the press than in the courts, the implications for free speech and separation of religion and state are clear. The difficulty for Turkey is the decision of which principle to back. The AK Party believes in the incorporation of Islamic principles into government, and ardent Kemalists believe this will be the end of Turkey's democracy. The Court ruled that the AK Party should no longer receive public funds for campaigns based on their views on secularism but that otherwise their actions are still constitutional under the provisions of separation of religion and government. Overall, these principles provide a solid model for a function democracy in today's world.

Stateless Nationalism and Separatism: Kurdistan

The condition of Kurdish affairs had been a roller-coaster of failed attempts to attain liberation and international sympathy over the years. Kurds have enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy within Turkey, something certainly no other minority group has achieved. Their geographic cohesion and homogeneity allowed for consistent, semi-autonomous control of their region throughout most modern conflicts over the area. Although Kurds bear the brunt of Turkish scrutiny, the group does have official representatives in the Turkish parliament and are mostly free to forge their own identity within the larger scope of Turkish statehood.[10] During the 1990s, a time of relative peace for the area, the Kurds "succeeded in translating their geo-political centrality into an unprecedented degree of international recognition."[11] The PKK and its related political agenda has been the largest detriment to the achievements of this cultural community by political standards because of their many violent acts.

The group's militant stance on political goals has complicated de facto Kurdish self-governance in Turkey. As mentioned earlier, the PKK has capitalized on the recent instability in peripheral regions and used this to launch attacks on military outposts and civil-

ians in southern Turkey. The massive increase in the urban poverty of the region in recent years has contributed to this latest increase in radical movements towards separatism. One author notes:

> Turkey's number two general admitted recently that while the country's military campaign has so far been successful in combating the PKK, Turkey has been 'unsuccessful' in dissuading a new generation of Kurds from joining the insurgent group. In 2006, Turkish military intelligence reported that 40 percent of the estimated 3,000 militants in northern Iraq had joined up since the PKK declared a five-year ceasefire in 1999. In Diyarbakir, locals talk of at least 150 teenagers who have enlisted this year. In Yuksekova, a town of 100,000, six have joined in the last month. … Only a decade ago Diyarbakir had a population of roughly 350,000. Now the city has nearly 1.5 million inhabitants, with upwards of 90 percent of families in some districts living below the poverty line. 'What future do these children have?' one local journalist asks. 'Crime, the PKK, radical Islam.'[12]

Rapid population growth, coupled with a slowing economy in the country, has contributed to increased dissatisfaction with government responsiveness. The latest result was the 2007 election of an anti-secular national party. But none have been as vocal as Kurdish insurgents. Despite the many advancements in Kurdish liberty since the 1980s (prior to 1980, everything from Kurdish language to Kurdish names were outlawed in favor of building national unity), regional political instability is obviously again fueling the fire of Kurdish insurgence, prompting increased repression from Ankara.

Even on a global scale, external factors such as regional warfare and insurgency coupled with internal political change have contributed to the phenomenon of stateless nationalism (Kurds, Palestinians, etc.). Chaotic domestic situations can contribute to upsurges in cultural/ethnic/regional identity. Since the Kurds have had the ability under Turkish rule to develop such a well-defined and homogenous culture, it makes sense that they cling to Kurdish identity in increasingly anarchistic times.

The Kurdish Question as a Domestic Policy Issue

After the Turkish War of Independence, Turkish negotiators of the Treaty of Lusanne[13] refused, on Kemalist principle, to acknowledge ethnic minorities as minorities.[14] Kemalism as a cohesive ideology was based on a central ethno-nationalism: Turkish. Turkishness was not gauged by family history, but by commitment to the Turkish state. Kurds, as a well established and outspoken minority in southern Anatolia, were the greatest threat to this new policy stratagem.

Ankara has deployed military measures dozens of times to suppress Kurdish uprisings in the south, but perhaps the most influential domestic policy was the policy instituted banning traditional Kurdish dress and official use of the Kurdish language.[15] Turkish forenames were added to the given names of all Kurdish children and the names of Kurdish locales were Turkified after the laws institutionalization. Although this policy was instituted in the 1940s and many of the practices have fallen by the wayside through the decades, large parts of it remain in effect and enforced today. In February 2009, a member of the Turkish parliament caused a general uproar when he took the podium and began addressing the assembly in the Kurdish language in protest of the air strikes in Diyarbakir, a practice still outlawed and outrageous in any official government setting.[16]

From these sorts of incidents it remains clear that the greatest threat to the independent Turkish state as it currently exists has always been and still is the rise of Kurdistan.

The new generation of PKK recruits gathered in impoverished Anatolian towns are causing increased violence and instability in this 'oasis' of calm in the region. A resurgence of Muslim identity is turning Turkish policy to previously unseen extremes. Domestic restraint of Kurds has lead to foreign policy complications as PKK members launch attacks from over the Iraqi border. As always, the resource rich southern provinces of Anatolia that constitute part of Kuridstan are unlikely to simply be handed over with the blessing of the Turkish ruling party. Particularly, the Diyabakir province where affiliation with the PKK is especially strong holds large mineral deposits and an oil pipeline crucial to Turkey's economy.

This author believes that the increased PKK aggression forces Turkey to make drastic changes in order to assuage Kurdish unrest. Either cede autonomy of the southern provinces to Kurds in Anatolia or redraft its acknowledgment of ethnic minorities and become a less 'ethno-nationalistic' centered state.

Implications of Turkish Nationalism for American Foreign Policy

While scholars of international affairs can garner many insights into Turkish life from studying the politics of nationalism, is it difficult to develop overarching theories or generalities about nationalism in general. Turkish national unity was pursued so aggressively and single-mindedly by early Kemalists that modern relations must be filtered through a special Turkish filter and general assumptions adjusted for Turkish analysis. Policy has been consistent in its "pattern of unity-authority-equality" through the decades, with most modifications in line with the principle of devrimcilik—adaptation through the ages.[17]

Kemalism in Turkey allowed for the reaffirmation of Turkish identity and the strong development of national pride and patriotism over the decades. In due course this became an example of the reemergence of ethnic nationalism as a tool of international relations in a global world. As one scholar of nationalism and global identity asserts, "It is modernity and the so-called 'post-modern' era that will pass away, while nations remain as the bedrock of human society."[18] Trends in international relations are just that: trends. States and nations have consistently been the key actors in political life for hundreds of years. Identity contributes directly to the success of nation-states, as the center of political life.

One question logically follows after the discussion of the components of political ideology in Turkey, how does this apply to the United States? Turkey has widely been seen as "an oasis of stability in a fragmented and uncertain region, a view which has added to the prominence accorded it in post-Cold War NATO politics."[19] Turkey has become a crucial military ally for the United States in recent decades. The United States is interested in fostering a positive relationship with a West-leaning predominantly-Muslim country that could serve as a model for neighboring Muslim nations to follow. Although Turkey's particular brand of secularist democracy never expanded to its Middle Eastern counterparts but has remained unwavering within its own borders. Not only the Middle East, but Turkey's other neighbors in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia have all sunk into internal conflict and international turmoil since the end of the Cold War while Turkey

has continued through relative calm. Turkey maintaining its rare blend of stable, democratic, secular, and pro-Western rule has made it an indispensible partner for the United States in Eurasian affairs.[20]

In terms of U.S. foreign policy, Turkey's domestic policy choices have caused complications for the U.S. lead military initiative in Iraq. The simultaneous inability of Turks to control the PKK in southern Turkey and the U.S. inability to control northern Iraq has created a precarious situation for all three nations. However, as an ally in a region where friends are sparse and Western support is even more so, the U.S. shrinking into the margins in Turkish support is a policy that would not be beneficial. More than ever as Turkey redistributes Muslim practices into official capacities we should strive to maintain their friendship and work together to solve problems in Eurasia and the Middle East. Allowing PKK aggressors to take refuge in an unstable region we should have under control while simultaneously thwarting Turkish intervention across the border is slowly alienating a power that has been our important Mideast ally. The United States should strive to keep in Turkey's good graces and aid in their attempts to overcome the Kurdish question and the aggression of the PKK.

Turkey is a unique partner, both in their methods of national cohesion, their steadfast ideals (be it in Kurdistan or Turkey), and their championing of Western values in an Eastern society. While their treatment of the Kurds needs improvement, Turkey has shown the capacity for improvement and the current conflict must be viewed as an opportunity to build further cooperation between Turkey and the U.S. by collaboratively working to create peace with the Kurds. We can find inspiration in the Turkish spirit and share with them and the Kurdish people our own visions for the future.

Endnotes

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2. Ibid, at 2.

3. Lasch, Christopher, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 98. "The replacement of informal types of associations by formal systems of socialization and control weakens social trust, undermines the willingness both to assume responsibility for oneself and to hold other accountable for their actions, destroys respect for authority, and thus turns out to be self-defeating."

4. Ibid, at 46. "The revival of tribalism, in turn, reinforces a reactive cosmopolitanism among elites."

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9. Kili, 388

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17. Kili, 381-404.

18. Smith, 5.

19. Robins, 657.

20. Robins, 662.