

INTRODUCTION: Identity, Race and Nationalism in Turkey

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This special issue of *the Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* seeks to focus attention on the way in which race, racism, identity, nation and nationalism are articulated among scholars working on Turkish identity and nationalism. Turkey provides an interesting site for investigation(s) on race, racism, nation and nationalism. On the one hand, it has a long history of many different ethnic and religious groups living together, side by side over centuries. On the other hand, Turkey is located in a peripheral location within Western hegemony and is portrayed in national mythology as a modern civic nation innocent of racism. Many Turkish scholars claim that unlike German or Italian totalitarian nationalisms, Turkish nationalism is civic as under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Turkey adopted French nationalism exclusively based on citizenship. According to this official view, the competing identities of Islam, Ottomanism and Turkism were resolved in favour of a peaceful and inclusive Turkish nationalism that was pieced together within the borders of the new republic.

According to many critical scholars of nationalism, however, race and racism are essential factors of the process of national identity formation. Some pointed out to strong key elements of racism in many forms of nationalism.¹ Some others have contended that nationalism is a necessary condition for racism and that, in already constituted national states, nationalist movements inescapably camouflage racism. At the very least, one could expect that the nationalist sentiment, particularly when the nation is outlined in phenotypic, linguistic or religious terms, undoubtedly intersects with racism – in particular, with cultural racism.² Many researchers of race, nation and identity draw attention to the fact that, in general, nationalism and racism are compellingly linked.

Nationalism is, on the other hand, a territorial concept. In a real sense, there is no nationalism without its claims to territoriality which distinguishes nation from ethnicity. Nationalism is an attempt to bridge the gap between nation and territory. In essence, as a modern concept, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across territorial and political ones.³ Nation building process, in this sense, a state driven process, particularly in the case of Turkey, whose markers of identity (such as language or religion) are frequently embedded in its official discourse,

policies and legislation. Given that the racial component of Turkishness was weak in the multi-religious polity of the Ottoman Empire, the production of the nation as a racially and culturally homogenous unit since the beginning of the Turkish Republic has been mainly the task of the state rather than society. This is also enhanced by the fact that ‘the national struggle’ in Turkey was a racially defensive one with inclinations to produce and reproduce internal and external others to forge its culturally constructed racial identity. One must remember that the ‘national independence and identity was first achieved against the Greeks and Armenians who were not external and alien to the Ottoman identity and territories.

Nationality is often thought of something ‘primordial’, ‘natural’ or pre-social. So, one may consider that Turks are different from Armenians in the way that the fish of the Mediterranean are different from those of the Black Sea. This sense of ‘naturalness’ is reinforced by stories/ myths nations often have about their own past. Nationalists often think of their nation in ways influenced by a traditional model of a pure or ideal case. This ideal version is of people inhabiting a single, unified territory. According to this view, the people are a kind of tribe. They are also considered a single ethnic group with a common language, shared history, and common culture. This culture may include shared religious beliefs as well. Many of us care about what sort of people we are, and many of the characteristics we want to have are perceived as long-term. And this may involve a long term process of self-creation. In a sense, constructing a national identity is a question of representing a particular ‘uniqueness’ or a certain biological, cultural or religious ‘purity’, as a necessary cement for the preservation of national unity and harmony, and its protection against internal or external enemies.

By way of Freud, nationalism can also be seen as a kind of ‘narcissism of minor differences’ that tends to essentialize the cultural, racial and ethnic differences where they may really not exist. As a racialized form of social identity, nationalism tends to infantilize the society. In the Turkish context, the umbilical cord between nation and state is traditionally strong and difficult to sever as the state acts as the father and the protector of the nation’s cultural/racial identity in its homogenized and purified forms against the external and internal threats.

There are many different kinds of nationalisms and a number of different varieties of racisms. Even though there is a tendency among scholars to treat these terms in two separate compartments, the discourses of nationalism and racism are never very far apart. In many

cases, either nationalism invents race or racism invents nation so they are not, in essence, mutually exclusive. There are essential continuities first of all because ways of thinking and of representation that are rooted in feeling of belonging, the image of community, and desire to present one's own as unique and superior; but above all, because racism is not simply a psychological phenomenon, it always has an institutional racism which became an essential aspect of modern nation-states from the start.

The Turkish republic emerged, in its modern form, at the end of the First World War on the ruins of the defeated Ottoman Empire, as a state with a military backbone, possessed an official ideology—known as Kemalism after the leader of the Turkish independence war, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—committed to statism and a tight information policy and administered by a militantly secular small modernizing elite.

From the start, the new Turkey identified itself directly and immediately with the history and culture of the Western world, claiming a total break with the Ottoman and Islamic past. This was a period during which the new regime started to transform social and political life in Turkey with a number of significant steps such as the abolition of the Caliphate, and the introduction of the constitution proclaiming the new state as a Turkish state. This was immediately followed by other laws which crushed the foremost expressions of Kurdish identity in the public sphere.⁴

These events were seen as marking the beginning of a series of reforms that would shake the foundations of the country's social and cultural life, and also played a significant role in shaping the way the identity of modern Turkey was constructed. In particular, new laws and legislations about language, education and the judiciary aimed to create a uniform Turkish state. Standard and secular education in Turkish as the official language deprived the Kurds of the most important means to preserve and maintain their cultural identity. The use of the Kurdish language was further limited by the judicial reforms. The Kurds had to use the official language in the new courts. These reforms also marked the beginning of the Turkification process, in other words the beginning of building a Turkish nation, based on the elements of the Turkish ethnicity, on the remains of what was left of the Ottoman Empire. The first Prime Minister of Turkey, Ismet Inonu, best expressed this grand aim in 1925:

Nationalism is our only factor of cohesion.... In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or 'le Turquism'.⁵

In line with the general 'scientific' context existing in the late 19th and early 20th-century Europe, where the concept of race was a preoccupation for the growing human sciences, a number of so-called scientific researchers were involved in developing the concept of the Turkish race as the basis of white Aryan race. To a large extent, this 'scientific' research strongly influenced Mustafa Kemal's thinking when he initiated his version of Turkish-ness in the 1920s, with the grand design of providing some comfort and an extra boost for Turkish national pride and self-esteem which had been sadly undermined during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In a state-sponsored systematic effort, missionary scientists were employed to prove the identicalness of the Turkish race and European 'white' race by verifying that ancient Turks were indeed the real ancestors of modern Aryan race(s). In doing so, a selective reconstruction of historical events took place in order to suppress the Ottoman past and pursue Kemalism's specific political goal of providing a fresh new start under white European flag. The central theme of this process, constructing a new Turkish identity, was the rejection of the Ottoman-Islamic past by glorifying the – invented – pre-Islamic past of the Turks, and presenting it as the original source of all white Western superiority.

At the beginning of the republican era, the nation-making project initiated / imposed by Mustafa Kemal and his close associates sought to create an ethnically homogeneous Turkey, a 'pure Turkish Turkey'. This was a painful and tragic period of Turkish history where even the slightest indication of dissent was suppressed violently. A frank historical account of this crucial phase, of course, contradicts the most favoured story of the modern Turkish nation as a peacefully civic egalitarian society.

It is now more than 90 years since the establishment of the Republic, but every Turkish child still grows up memorizing Ataturk's 1927 address to the youth, which says 'the noble blood in your veins' and 'how happy the one who says he is a Turk'. All primary and secondary schools still teach a 'Turkish' history that starts with the Huns of Central Asia, giving an exclusively ethnic, not civic, sense of a nation. Turkish nationalist demagogues, not necessarily only in the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), but even some leading members of the so-called social democratic main opposition party, Republican Peoples Party (CHP), still

speak of ‘pure Turks’ in the country, clearly excluding the Kurds and all non-Muslims, and, recently sharply against (Muslim) Arabs, as the number of Syrian refugees increases fast in the country.⁶

All this explains why a TV series and a cinema film based on the series, “[*The Valley of the Wolves*](#)”, that glorifies gun-toting nationalists who mow down their mainly Kurdish enemies, is by far the highest rating TV series and one of the highest box office returns in the history of Turkish TV and cinema. Even the speaker of the Turkish parliament, Bulent Arinc, described it in 2006 as ‘absolutely magnificent’ and ‘completely true to life’.⁷

The articles published in this special issue cover many issues around race, racism, nation and national identity in Turkey. Iliia Xypolia sets the scene by providing a detailed historical account of the racist aspects/ foundations of modern Turkish nationalism. Tunc Aybak offers new insight into the Turkish state’s Armenian problem and the root causes of the denial. Nil Mutluer’s article takes us to a discussion of the perceptions and treatment of Turkey’s Alevis by the state and Alevi responses to persecution and discrimination. Mesut Yegen offers new understanding of Turkish left’s precarious approach to the Turkish state’s Kurdish question. Finally, reflecting on a comparison of Turkish and Greek national identities, Bulent Gokay and Lily Hamourtziadou demonstrate how race and otherness play a significant role in Turkish and Greek national identities.

We are hoping that this special issue will inspire cross-national conversations on the ways in which the articulations of race, racism, national identity and nationalism are closely interconnected in the case of modern Turkey. An important question requiring closer examination concerns the modes by which race and racism have been mutually constituted through modernity, nation-state formation, and development along European lines. We are hoping that future critical scholarship on nationalism and identity in Turkey will incorporate an analysis of race and racism into their research. And finally we are hopeful that this debate on the phenomenon of race and racism will lead us to rethink the articulation of Turkish nationalism and definition of citizenship in modern Turkey.

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Notes

¹ E. Gellner, John A. Hall and Ian Jarvie (eds), *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996, pp. 108-111.

² E. Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism', in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class Ambiguous Identities*, London and New York: Verso, pp. 37-68.

³ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* Oxford: Blackwell, 1983

⁴ For a detailed account and analysis of the secular reforms, see Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, (London: Hurst and co, 1998) especially Chapter 15 for the relevant period. The religious brotherhoods to a large extent went underground and were politicized more than ever. They still remain remarkably powerful.

⁵ Quote in B. Simsir, *İngiliz Belgeleriyle Türkiye'de Kurt Sorunu: 1925-1938* [The Kurdish Question in Turkey in British Documents: 1925-1938], (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1991) p. 58.

⁶ Birgül Ayman Güler, a member of parliament of CHP from Izmir, said the 'Turkish nation' and 'Kurdish nationality' are not and cannot be equals. 'There is no Kurdish conflict in Turkey,' Güler further stated. Güler's remarks against Kurds have revealed a rift within the party, while some CHP members expressed their support for Güler, others said Güler displayed her discriminatory attitude towards Kurds. (Hurriyet Daily News, 2 February 2014; Daily Sabah, 25 January 2013; Today's Zaman, 24 January 2013)

⁷ 'Talking Turkey', National Review, 6 April 2006, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/217256/talking-turkey-jonathan-eric-lewis> (accessed in September 2015). The *Valley of the Wolves* features, among other obscenities, a Jewish doctor who harvests human organs from Iraqi prisoners of war to sell to Israelis.