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THE KEMALIST DISCOURSE AND A PARADIGM SHIFT IN TURKISH POLITICS

This study examines the conceptual, intellectual, ideological, and historical roots of the kemalist discourse, as well as the theoretical foundations of Westernization, modernization, and secularization of Turkish society. The aim of the research is to analyze the role of kemalist discourse in Turkish politics and to identify the paradigm shift from kemalism to alternative political discourses. The objectives include identifying the strengths of kemalism and revealing its weaknesses and limitations amid profound political transformations and changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

The relevance of the study is determined by the decline of the dominant kemalist discourse and the rise of alternative political ideologies, particularly following the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party. The methodology is based on a critical review of academic literature and historical sources, as well as methods of historical analysis and critical discourse analysis. These approaches make it possible to examine how the kemalist discourse shaped the secular republican political order and guided the development of Turkish society since the foundation of the republic.

The findings show that kemalism functioned as a hegemonic ideology of state and nation-building, transforming Turkey from an Eastern political entity into a modern, Westernized, and secular state. During the nation-building process, the kemalist elite focused on constructing a new secular and Western-oriented national identity, marginalizing Islam, the Ottoman past, and certain ethno-religious minorities. At the same time, internal contradictions of kemalism were revealed, which contributed to the rise of conservative and Islamist movements and the search for a new national paradigm. The study enhances understanding of the complexity and trends of contemporary Turkish politics and provides a foundation for further research.

Keywords: kemalism, Turkey, nationalism, secularism, Westernization, Islam, neo-Ottomanism.

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Кемалистік дискурс және түрік саясатындағы парадигманың өзгеруі

Бұл зерттеуде кемалистік дискурстың концептуалдық, интеллектуалдық, идеологиялық және тарихи негіздері, сондай-ақ түрік қоғамын вестернизациялау, модернизациялау және секуляризациялау теориялық алғышарттары қарастырылады.

Зерттеудің мақсаты – түрік саясатындағы кемалистік дискурсты талдау және кемализмнен баламалы саяси дискурстарға өту үдерісін анықтау. Зерттеу міндеттері кемализмнің күшті жақтарын айқындау және Түркияның ішкі және сыртқы саясатындағы терең өзгерістер жағдайында оның әлсіз тұстары мен шектеулерін анықтауды қамтиды.

Зерттеудің өзектілігі кемалистік дискурстың үстемдігінің әлсіреуімен және әсіресе Әділет және даму партиясының билікке келуінен кейін баламалы идеологиялардың күшеюімен байланысты. Әдіснама ғылыми әдебиеттер мен тарихи дереккөздерді сыни талдауға, тарихи талдау және сыни дискурс-талдау әдістеріне негізделеді. Осы әдістер арқылы кемалистік дискурстың республиканың құрылуынан бері зайырлы саяси тәртіпті қалыптастырудағы және түрік қоғамының дамуын бағыттаудағы рөлі зерттеледі.

Зерттеу нәтижелері кемализмнің мемлекет пен ұлт құрудағы гегемониялық идеология болғанын және Түркияны шығыстық саяси құрылымнан заманауи, вестернизацияланған және зайырлы мемлекетке айналдырғанын көрсетеді. Ұлт қалыптастыру барысында кемалистік элита исламды, османдық мұраны және кейбір этно-діни азшылықтарды шеттете отырып, батыстық және зайырлы ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыруға басымдық берді. Сонымен қатар кемализмнің ішкі қайшылықтары анықталып, олар консервативтік және исламшыл қозғалыстардың өсуіне

жаңа ұлттық парадигманы іздеуге ықпал етті. Бұл зерттеу қазіргі түрік саясатының үрдістерін тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: кемализм, Түркия, ұлтшылдық, зайырлылық, вестернизация, ислам, неосоманизм.

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Кемалистский дискурс и смена парадигмы в турецкой политике

В данной работе исследуются концептуальные, интеллектуальные, идеологические и исторические корни кемалистского дискурса, а также теоретические основы вестернизации, модернизации и секуляризации турецкого общества. Цель исследования заключается в анализе кемалистского дискурса в турецкой политике и выявлении парадигмального сдвига от кемализма к альтернативным политическим дискурсам. В задачи исследования входит определение сильных сторон кемализма, а также выявление его слабостей и ограничений в условиях глубоких политических трансформаций и изменений во внутренней и внешней политике Турции.

Актуальность исследования обусловлена ослаблением доминирующего кемалистского дискурса и усилением альтернативных идеологий, прежде всего после прихода к власти Партии справедливости и развития. Методология исследования основывается на критическом анализе научной литературы и исторических источников, а также на методах исторического и критического дискурс-анализа. С их помощью рассматривается роль кемалистского дискурса в формировании светского республиканского политического порядка и в развитии турецкого общества с момента образования республики.

Результаты исследования показывают, что кемализм выступал гегемонистской идеологией государственного и национального строительства, трансформировав Турцию из восточного политического образования в современное, вестернизированное и светское государство. В процессе национального строительства кемалистская элита сосредоточилась на формировании новой светской и западно ориентированной национальной идентичности, вытесняя ислам, османское прошлое и ряд этнорелигиозных меньшинств. В то же время выявлены внутренние противоречия кемализма, которые привели к росту консервативных и исламистских движений и поиску новой национальной парадигмы. Исследование способствует более глубокому пониманию динамики и тенденций современной турецкой политики.

Ключевые слова: кемализм, Турция, национализм, секуляризм, вестернизация, ислам, неосоманизм.

Introduction

The paper sheds light upon the conceptual, intellectual, ideological and historical roots of the Kemalist discourse and theoretical underpinnings of Westernization, modernization and secularization of Turkish society. The goal of the study is to examine the Kemalist discourse in Turkish politics, and a paradigm shift from Kemalism to alternative political discourses. The objectives of the study are to identify the advantages and strengths of Kemalism and ascertain its weaknesses and drawbacks against the backdrop of profound political transformations and shifts in domestic and foreign policy of Türkiye. Today's Turkish society and politics are widely considered as an arena of a power struggle between the conventional hegemonic Kemalist discourse and an Islamist discourse represented by the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) under the leadership of Re-

cep Tayyip Erdoğan (Adak 2022, p. 3). Scholarship points to the recent developments in Turkish politics, notably the attempts of the AKP to craft a new society and state by marginalizing and replacing the dominant Kemalist republican system (Kutay 2020, p. 69). Kemalist nation building has heavily relied on Westernization, secularism and Turkish nationalism. Yet at the same time, the Kemalist ideology has suppressed and excluded Islam and the Ottoman past from nation building process and from forging a new nation and a new political regime. In this regard, the AKP or Erdoğanism has skillfully been exploiting Islam and Ottomanism (neo-Ottomanism) for its political objectives. Scholarship draws attention to the rise of the AKP as an indication of the decline of Kemalism, whose two pillars, secularism and forced Westernization have clashed with Turkish society (Coşkun 2023). Yet Aytürk and Esen claim that as the post-Kemalist paradigm

is not widely embraced in Türkiye, there is a need to nurture an alternative paradigm (Ufuk Haksever 2024: 111). Furthermore, despite the conventional narrative that Kemalist nationalism has excluded Islam from Turkish national identity, scholarship argues that even in the context of aggressive secular regime, Muslimness has remained the precondition for being a Turk and getting full citizenship rights (Öktem 2025: 25-26). Öktem maintains that from its inception the Republic of Türkiye has been an ethnocentric regime (Öktem 2025: 20).

From this standpoint, although as the founding ideology of the Republic of Türkiye, Kemalism has remained the hegemonic political and ideological discourse in Turkish politics and society, its dominant position has been challenged and eroded by alternative political ideologies, especially the AKP. In Kutay's view, the AKP has sought to craft a new conservative political regime by displacing the mainstream Kemalist secularist regime (Kutay 2020: 69). In this regard, it is highly relevant to re-examine the historical, conceptual and ideological roots and underpinnings of Kemalism. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Kemalist elites initiated and effected radical and profound social changes and cultural transformations that were marked by the painful transition from the Ottoman period to the era of Turkish republicanism and secular regime. Drawing on the Western European model of modernity, secularism and nationalism, the Kemalist political establishment embarked upon the path of erecting a new society and political regime. The advent of the Kemalist political regime heralded the historical, ideological and cultural rupture from Islam and the Ottoman legacy. Having prioritized secularism, modernity and Turkish nationalism, the Kemalist political establishment came to increasingly perceive Islam and the Ottoman past as 'other' and an impediment to the Turkish nation's path towards Westernization.

Therefore, the founding fathers of the Republic of Türkiye cultivated an essentialist form of Turkish nationalism and systematically cleansed the Turkish history of its Ottoman segment, eliminating Islam from a new Turkish national identity (Bora 2015: 41). Atatürk's Westernization project placed European modernity at the center of nation building, simultaneously 'othering' and excluding Ottoman history and Islam (Uzer 2020: 277). In addition to nurturing Turkish nationalism and reinforcing etatism, secularism and modernity, the Kemalist elites increasingly focused on cultural and ethnic homogenization. They also have excluded certain

social and ethnic groups, forging an authoritarian rule and systematic suppression of dissent and alternative ideologies (Yılmaz 2021: 72). As Atatürk himself was a military man, the Turkish army has traditionally been the main guardian and guarantor of the republican order and secular political system. Yet with the rise of the AKP, the decisive role of the Turkish army in protecting the secular order has eroded. Despite numerous charges and allegations that the advent of the AKP has led to Islamization of Turkish politics and society, leading scholars question their validity. Valiyev argues that Türkiye under the rule of the AKP has not witnessed Islamization, rather Erdoğan has prioritized dismantling the closed state discourse of Kemalists and fortifying the state via a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, which binds both nationalists and religious groups together (Valiyev 2025: 3). Having rejected the principles and narratives crafted by the Kemalist political establishment, these groups have been instrumental in the deconstruction of the Kemalist discourse and have managed to incorporate themselves into the Turkish national identity and project (Valiyev 2025: 3).

Materials and methods

The study draws upon the relevant studies and historical sources pertaining to Kemalism, Kemalist nation building, modernization and crafting a new nation, the nexus and rupture between the Ottoman past and the republican period, the decline of Kemalism and emergence of alternative political and ideological forces and discourses. The study employs a variety of research methods. The most important research method is a review of the relevant literature as studies on this issue provide up-to-date knowledge, conceptual and theoretical basis of the problem, indicating gaps in scholarship. Besides conducting a literature review, the study uses methods of historical analysis and critical discourse analysis. These methods are essential in exploring and getting a deeper understanding of the political views and ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye. Atatürk's ideas conceptually, ideologically and theoretically underpin the state and societal structure and system of Türkiye. Rooted in and evolved from the late Ottoman period political developments and discourses, Kemalism became the founding ideology of the Republic of Türkiye that still sustains Turkish society and political system (Zürcher 2005: 14). As part of the late Ottoman political and intellectual elites, Mustafa

Kemal and his followers pursued two key goals, namely liberation of the homeland from the Greek invaders and Western colonial powers and establishment of a modern secular nation state (Yavuz 2019: 20). Studies refer to nationalism and secularism as the twin pillars of Kemalist ideology (Yavuz 2019: 10). Although scholarship considers the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the founding ideology of Türkiye, studies emphasize that Kemalist nationalism and secularism have become the main sources of current deep crises in Turkish politics and society (Yavuz 2019: 10), which have reflected in the rise of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and reemergence of Islam as a powerful political and ideological force in Türkiye (Tokdoğan 2024: 73-74).

Literature review

In the current Turkish politics and society dominated by the AKP under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Kemalism as the founding ideology of Türkiye and the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) are seen as the key source of trouble and problems in Turkish society (Tokdoğan 2024: 74). This is because Islam that has always been central in Turkish history and culture and provided national and cultural cohesion, was systematically suppressed and marginalized during Mustafa Kemal's aggressive Westernization and cultural reforms and afterwards (Tokdoğan 2024: 74). The birth of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 was marked by the profound cultural, ideological and political rupture of the new Kemalist regime from the previous Ottoman period, which was reflected in Kemalist attempts to suppress and eliminate Islam, Islamic traditions and groups. Nation building process and construction of a new unified nation and national identity were accompanied by the state-orchestrated systematic assaults on Islam. In this cultural war waged by the Kemalist regime the biggest losers were Islam, Oriental identity of the Turks and the Ottoman legacy (Tokdoğan 2024: 73-74). Besides Islam and the Ottoman past, certain non-Turkish ethnic groups such the Kurds who shared common religion and history rooted in the Ottoman past with the Turks became victims of Kemalist monoethnic and monocultural nation state model (Ege 2022: 558; Yavuz 2016: 455). Kemalist nationalism and efforts to craft an ethnically homogenized society and Turkish identity led to the erosion and marginalization of Islam and Kurdish identity (Ege 2022: 558).

Uzer asserts that the founding father of the Republic of Türkiye held negative attitudes towards the Ottoman past, rejecting any idea of reconciling their Westernizing efforts with Islam and Ottomanism (Uzer 2020: 275). Therefore, Atatürk and other prominent leaders of the early republican period suppressed Islam and the Ottoman legacy, and at the same time, made great strides in crafting a Turkish nation state resembling and imitating Western European nations (Uzer 2020: 275). Despite the fact that Mustafa Kemal and other leading political figures in the early republican period were the products of the late Ottoman era modernization and Westernization efforts, they associated the Ottoman past with bitter defeats, humiliations, cultural, economic and political backwardness. Since the Ottoman past and Islam were identified as 'other' and irrelevant for Kemalist nation building, the new republican regime systematically sought identity change from an Islamic and Ottoman identity to a Western, secular and Turkish nationalist identity (Uzer 2018a: 339). Besides, the Kemalist regime was in search of civilizational and cultural change by discarding its Oriental and Islamic affiliation and shifting towards the West, adopting Western lifestyle predicated upon rationalism and science rooted in the European Enlightenment (Uzer 2018b: 30).

Although the Kemalist regime and its aggressive Westernization and secularization policies made Islam and the Ottoman past less visible and marginal, scholarship highlights their comeback and resurgence over the past several decades. This has reflected in the renaissance of Islam and Islamic political movement across the country, which have eventually prompted a slow shift away from the dominant Kemalist discourse towards Islamic and Ottoman identity (Uzer 2018a: 340). With the termination of the CHP's monopoly over politics and power at the end of the 1940s and rise of alternative political parties, certain segments of Turkish society reclaimed the nation's Islamic identity and the Ottoman past. In this case, Yavuz and Öztürk argue that the reformist Kemalist elites with predominately European and Balkan background neither acknowledged nor understood the role and power of Islam and the Ottoman legacy in Anatolia (Yavuz & Öztürk 2019: 2). With European background and heavily influenced by the Jacobin French ideology, the Kemalist elite failed to grasp to what extent Islam was central to the worldviews of Anatolian Turks (Yavuz & Öztürk 2019: 2).

As the hegemonic state-inspired ideology, Kemalism became the guardian of the republican order

and secular system (Yavuz, 2019, p. 12), the Kemalist regime outlawed and suppressed any alternative discourses and ideologies, especially Islam and adherents of political Islam, labelling and framing them as hostile elements and proponents of 'Islamic fanaticism' (Yavuz & Öztürk 2019: 4-5). The *laik* ideology or *laiklik* (secularism) was instrumentalized as the driving force of the top-down modernization, Westernization and cultural change (Yavuz & Öztürk 2019: 5). Studies stress the conceptual and theoretical origin of the Young Turk movement and Kemalism. In Yavuz's view, positivism or Auguste Comte's social change and an idea of progress came to increasingly shape and guide modernist discourses in the Ottoman empire and then in the early republican period (Yavuz 2019: 10). According to Auguste Comte's theory of social change, human societies tend to evolve through key three stages of progress, namely theological, metaphysical and positive stages. While in the theological stage religion serves as the hegemonic concept in shaping people's understanding of the world, the metaphysical stage is marked by a shift away from supernatural explanations towards scientific inquiry, and in the highest positive stage, people increasingly tend to rely on reason and scientific knowledge and prioritize science and rational understanding of changes, society and the world. In this regard, positivism was central to the Young Turk movement's efforts to dissociate European modernity from European cultural and Christian roots and make use of it in developing rational thinking (Yavuz 2019: 10).

From this point of view, positivism lied at the core of Kemalist modernization and laicism (secularism) as its guiding principle. The Kemalist top-down nation building in line with positivism, science and European modernity rejected and precluded the influence of religion in all essential dimensions of society such as economics, politics, education, community, family and way of life (Yavuz 2019: 10). Moreover, despite the top-down state-sponsored consolidating and homogenizing peculiarities of Kemalism grounded in secularism and Turkish nationalism, studies point to the exclusionary and divisive character of the Kemalist ideology. Specifically, the suppression and exclusion of Islam, the Ottoman past, and Kurdish ethnonationalism from the nation building process by the Kemalist elite soon backfired. Although the Kemalist ideology has remained the dominant discourse supplying Turkish society with political and cultural cohesiveness, knitting it together, the resurgence of political Islam and Kurdish nationalism has shown the weakness and short-

comings of Kemalism. In this regard, the twilight of the CHP and ascension of the AKP to power have signaled the need to address the deep cleavages and divisions along cultural, political, ethnic and religious lines in Turkish society.

To be specific, the AKP has highlighted the necessity to incorporate Islam into Turkish politics and national identity to curb Kurdish ethnonationalism, prevent the nation from being taken apart and provide national cohesion and a deep sense of unity (Yavuz 2019: 16). Although studies tend to highlight a growing Islamization of Turkish society since the advent of the AKP, certain scholars call into question the soundness of such assumptions. In Valiyev's view, the conventional narratives about citizenship and nationalism predicated upon Kemalism are no longer relevant against the backdrop of the resurgence of more robust and pertinent discourses (Valiyev 2025: 3). For that reason, the rise of the AKP ought not to be seen as Islamization and at the same time, the political developments and trends should not be oversimplified. The ascension of the AKP is rooted in the need of Turkish society to redefine the conventional political discourses that had guided the development of Türkiye throughout the 20th century and cultivate a new sound strategy to address acute domestic and foreign policy issues. Specifically, the Turkish political establishment is now preoccupied with the reconsideration of the Kemalist secular discourse and offering a more robust and sound strategy that would guide the nation in the 21st century. This is reflected in the wider acceptance of Islam, neo-Ottomanism and ethnic minorities, which demonstrates that the Turkish state under the rule of the AKP has managed to transcend the conventional confined state structure and craft a more inclusive and sustainable political order (Valiyev 2025: 3-4).

Results and discussion

Since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, Turkish policymakers have maintained a pro-European and pro-Western foreign policy course, which reflect in the country's membership in Transatlantic political and security institutions. In this regard, Yilmaz and Bilgin argue that Türkiye's rapprochement and further integration with Transatlantic institutions have led the country to acquire Western identity (Yilmaz & Bilgin 2006: 39). In Aydın's view, Türkiye's Western orientation and identity were cultivated under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with its aggressive Europe-

anization and profound cultural transformation of Turkish society from an Oriental archaic into modern and industrial one (Aydin 2000: 105). Although modern Türkiye's Western identity was shaped in the early republican era, its roots go back to the late Ottoman period when Ottoman political and military elites emulated Europe (Ahmad 2008a: 196). In the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman leaders came to understand that profound structural reforms could pave the way for the further existence of the Ottoman empire. Hence, conceptual and intellectual foundations of modernization in Ottoman society were laid in that period (Zürcher 2005: 14; Zürcher 2010: 136).

Despite its Oriental origin, the Ottoman empire was both an eastern and European empire, encompassing the vast lands of Asia, Africa and Europe. In the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman empire was referred to as "the sick man of Europe" (Ahmad 2008b: 262; Taspinar 2008: 15). Up to the end of the 1870s the River of Danube had separated the Ottoman realms from Europe. Yet subsequently, the empire's European possessions were considerably reduced. In the eyes of the educated Ottoman intellectuals and officers, the Ottoman empire consisted of two key realms: on the one hand, Anatolia, and on the other, Rumelia. In 1908, the leaders of Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) raised the alarm about the possible loss of European realms of the empire due to the Western advocacy for the independence of Macedonia, which might lead to the removal of the capital from Istanbul to Asia Minor (Hanioğlu 2011: 200). They feared that the move of the empire's capital to Asia would exclude the Ottoman state from the ranks of European powers, reducing it to the status of a second-class Asiatic state. In case of the loss of Rumelia, the Ottoman empire would be reduced to the level of Persia or any other eastern state (Hanioğlu 2001: 236).

Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had moved the country's capital from Istanbul to Ankara, he strongly adhered to the conventional CUP discourse about the strategic significance of keeping a European character and identity of Türkiye, which was central to the survival of a new emerging nation. Having shared the Young Turks' vision, Mustafa Kemal argued that the loss of the nation's European character and reducing it to an Asiatic country like Iran would mean the end of Türkiye as a nation state (Hanioğlu 2011: 201). However, despite the loss of European possessions and the move of the capital to Anatolia, Mustafa Kemal was certain that the na-

tion's European character did not vanish, and quite the opposite, it remained unchanged, having kept its European identity. In Mustafa Kemal's view, Türkiye's Europeaness rooted not in geography but rather in culture and civilization. Despite residing mostly in Asia, Mustafa Kemal and its followers identified themselves and the country with Europe and the Western civilization. In this sense, he made tremendous efforts to craft a Turkish nation state and society in European cultural terms. Hanioglu claims that Mustafa Kemal's endeavors to modernize and Westernize Türkiye and Turkish society constituted one of the greatest social, political, cultural and societal experiments and transformations of the first half of the 20th century (Hanioglu 2011: 201).

As an officer in the Ottoman army, Mustafa Kemal was amongst progressive Ottoman intellectuals and military who advocated modernization and Europeanization of the empire. In this context, his pro-Western and pro-European vision and views had been shaped before the Turkish War of Independence in 1919-1923. Like other pro-Westerners in the Ottoman empire, Mustafa Kemal was convinced that the country was destined to be part of Europe. Yet to achieve that goal, he understood that profound and dramatic cultural and political changes and transformations were needed. For this reason, Mustafa Kemal and his followers initiated and effectuated the Westernization project. In their endeavor to modernize Turkish society, Mustafa Kemal and his followers sought to convince the Turkish people that their country was integral part of Europe, and at the same time, they pursued the goal of persuading Europeans that the Turks in fact shared the same culture as theirs and thereby both the Turks and Europeans were part of the Western culture and civilization (Hanioglu 2011: 202).

Literature draws attention to the two key aspects of Mustafa Kemal's Westernization project, specifically on the one hand, ideological and political, and on the other, cultural and social (Hanioglu 2011: 202). In ideological and social terms, Mustafa Kemal attempted to minimize everything that undermined and suppressed the nation's Europeaness and at the same time, he reinforced its European character. His aggressive and vigorous Westernization project entailed the sharp decrease of the role of Islam in politics and society as it was seen as the main impediment to modernization of the country. In this case, merely convincing the Turks that they were part of Europe would not be enough to foster and entrench Türkiye's Western identity. Perhaps the most important precondition for becoming a Eu-

ropean nation was to embrace European culture and Western civilization. From this standpoint, Mustafa Kemal contended that any part of local Turkish cultural norms that were not in line with Western civilization ought to be discarded and eliminated. Having rejected any idea of non-Western modernity, Mustafa Kemal called attention to the necessity of removing local cultural norms that were not consistent with Western concepts of modernity. In this regard, a multitude of local indigenous cultural and social elements associated with Islam were removed.

To achieve his goal and initiate change and cultural transformations, Mustafa Kemal launched top-down state-orchestrated assaults on Islam, Islamic traditions and institutions. Scholars draw attention to one significant advantage that Mustafa Kemal possessed unlike other great reformers and modernizers of the East. Specifically, Atatürk drew from the experiences of the reformers of the Ottoman society at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries who had increasingly sought to modernize the empire by introducing Western modernity. Although at that time modernity and its effects touched upon the upper level of Ottoman society, it was unable to penetrate the lower social strata. As European modernity was solely embraced by Ottoman political elites, to manage the state and governance, they had to devise a hybrid legal system, consisting of both Islamic legal system and European legal principles. Despite being part of Turkish political elites who adhered to Western modernity, Mustafa Kemal was convinced that Western influence should not be confined within the upper strata of Turkish society, and it ought to penetrate the lower social strata, especially those of the most conservative segments of Türkiye. Social and cultural revolution devised and spearheaded by Mustafa Kemal was intended to trigger radical changes and transformations, which would turn Türkiye into a Western nation state regardless of its geographical position (Hanioğlu 2011: 205).

Modernization and nation building in Türkiye under Mustafa Kemal in the 1920s-1930s pursued the goals of transforming the nation from an Oriental backward country into an advanced modern Western political entity. Nation building undertaken by Mustafa Kemal was conceptually, ideologically and theoretically underpinned by the Six Arrows (*Altı Ok*), which became the founding ideology of the Republic of Türkiye. Atatürk's Six Arrows consisted of republicanism (*cumhuriyetçili*), nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), populism (*halkçılık*), etatism (*devletçilik*), laicism (*laiklik*), and revolutionism or reformism (*inkılapçılık*) (Ahmad 2008a:

186; Yavuz & Öztürk 2019: 4; Zürcher 2005: 14). The driving force and ideological underpinning of Atatürk's Westernization project was Turkish nationalism, which was rooted in as well as emanated and evolved from the late Ottoman era when the rising Ottoman intellectuals had been in search of a national identity (Morin & Lee 2010: 6). Despite historically being an Islamic society, Türkiye under Mustafa Kemal drifted away from religious determination, pivoting to Western secularism (Hanioğlu 2011: 131). From this perspective, Mustafa Kemal's modernization and cultural reforms were guided by secularism, nationalism (forging a new nation) and the concept of a new history (Foss 2014: 826; Morin & Lee 2010: 4).

In Mustafa Kemal's view, Islam, the Ottoman past and other local elements were an impediment to his Westernization project. Influenced by Western European ideas of nationalism, secularism and modernism, Atatürk and his followers nurtured Turkish nationalism that was designed to replace religion, specifically Islam (Ahmad 2008a: 184). Drawing upon the French experience of building a secular society and the concept of secularism (*laïcité*), Atatürk embarked upon the path of transforming an Oriental Islamic society into a Western secular society. Having seen Islam as an obstruction to modernization, the new republican regime launched systematic assaults upon Islam. Atatürk himself emphasized that Islam was in fact a religion of Arabs who used it as a tool to dominate non-Arabs (Hanioğlu 2011: 132). Rejecting any idea of a positive impact of Islam, he increasingly focused on curtailing Islam's leading role in society. At the same time, in his search of the greatness of the Turks, he plunged into ancient history, arriving at the conclusion that before their conversion to the religion of Arabs, the Turks had been a great people and even they had been the founders of an advanced civilization in human history (Hanioğlu 2011: 132).

After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the Ottoman past and Islamic traditions were found an obstacle to progress (Foss 2014: 826). Aggressive modernization and cultural transformations systematically erased everything deemed to be a hindrance to the Westernization project. In particular, the Ottoman past and Arab-Persian cultural legacy were seen as obsolete, which needed to be discarded for the sake of a higher and nobler cause. The Arabi-Persian script was replaced by a new Latin alphabet, the Islamic calendar was substituted by the Gregorian calendar and Turkish citizens were obliged to embrace cultural changes and adopt

Western lifestyle (Foss 2014: 826). Besides, it was believed that history and political ideology predicated upon Islam and the Ottoman legacy were considered irrelevant and inappropriate for a modernizing and secularizing nation state (Alaranta 2008: 124). For this purpose, Mustafa Kemal and his followers engaged themselves in history writing and knowledge construction to legitimize their actions and make their efforts sustainable. The Ministry of Education and other agencies were tasked with writing and producing standard textbooks in line with the ideals and policies of the state. As a result of the top-down state-sponsored history writing, in 1930 “The Outlines of Turkish History” was published (Hanioglu 2011: 163).

Seen as a revisionist interpretation of human and Turkish history, “The Outlines of Turkish History” entirely overlooked the Ottoman past. In this case, 1919 was indicated as the inception of history of the Turkish people and a new Turkish nation state when the Turkish War of Independence began (Alaranta 2008: 124). To legitimize and sustain the new regime, Mustafa Kemal focused on erasing all traces of Ottoman history and mythologizing the historical past, glorifying Turkish history and putting greater emphasis on the contributions of the Turks to human civilization. In this regard, Islam was defined as the main cause of Turkic decline (Hanioglu 2011: 165). At the same time, in terms of mythologizing history, the Turkish people were put at the center of nation building and modernization of Turkish society. To cultivate a modern Turkish identity and Turkishness, Atatürk and his followers promoted the thesis of a civilizing mission of the Turks that preceded the Islamic period and went back to the ancient times (Hanioglu 2011: 165). In forging and reinforcing new nationalistic narratives, the republican regime pursued the goal of convincing the outside world that the Turks were not a backward, primitive and underdeveloped people, and simultaneously, inculcating a sense of pride and greatness in the Turkish people. This reflected in the history textbooks, in which the Turks were portrayed as the first builders of civilization in human history, as the “highest and first civilized race of humanity”, and the founders of Chinese, Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Roman civilizations (Foss 2014: 829; Uzer 2020: 278).

Conclusion

Kemalism has been at the core of nation building, modernization, Westernization, and the secular republican order in Türkiye since 1923. As the

founder of the Republic of Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ushered the country into a new era of modernity and Western orientation. To turn his country and people into a modern Western and highly developed nation, Atatürk and the republican political establishment carried out the transition of Türkiye from the imperial period to a new republican era. In the process of this transformation, the Kemalist elites triggered dramatic and tectonic political and cultural change in Turkish society. In this case, the founders of the Republic of Türkiye embarked upon the path of crafting a new state, society and nation, placing at the center of nation building the Turkish people as the state forming nation and builders of a new political entity. In engineering a new society, the founding fathers discarded the Ottoman past and Islam that had long bound together a multireligious, multicultural and multiethnic empire.

Despite the Ottoman empire acknowledging religious and cultural diversity of the state and thereby bestowing cultural autonomy upon the conquered peoples, Islam was the mainstream and dominant religion, which lied at the foundation of the Ottoman civilization. Yet with the advent of the new political regime in lieu of the Ottoman empire, the new Turkish state focused on building a culturally and ethnically homogenized nation. Besides, Atatürk and his followers placed a greater emphasis upon instilling modernity and European identity in the Turkish people. In the context of ethnic and cultural homogenization, many non-Turkish peoples, including those who adhered to Islam, were subjected to cultural assimilation. Moreover, the founding fathers overlooked the significance of Islam and Ottoman history in the nation building process. In forging a new national identity predicated upon Europeaness and Western modernity, the Kemalist political elites excluded the Ottoman past and Islam as inconsistent with modernity. This in turn has indicated the obvious weaknesses and limitations of Kemalism as the founding ideology of Türkiye.

A greater emphasis upon secularism, Westernization and suppression of alternative ideologies and identities at the expense of Islam, the Ottoman history and ethnic minorities, primarily the Kurds, have revealed the contentious, divisive and flawed character of the Kemalist discourse. For that reason, from its inception, the secular republican regime and Kemalism have increasingly been challenged and contested by alternative discourses and groups. After the one-party system came to an end led by the Kemalist CHP, new alternative political and ethnic forces reemerged. While being loyal to Atatürk’s legacy, these forces

promoted different discourses and perspectives. Excessively marginalized and swept under the rug, different ideologies such as Islam, Ottomanism and Kurdish ethnonationalism experienced their resurgence. Although the Kemalist regime with the support of the Turkish army has endeavored to maintain the secular regime intact, the hegemony of Kemal-

ism in Turkish politics has been eroded. In particular, the emergence of the AKP led to erosion of the dominant role of Kemalism. Even before the advent of the AKP, other political parties had invoked Islam and neo-Ottomanism to address the deep divisions, reevaluate the Kemalist regime and effectuate meaningful changes in Turkish society.

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